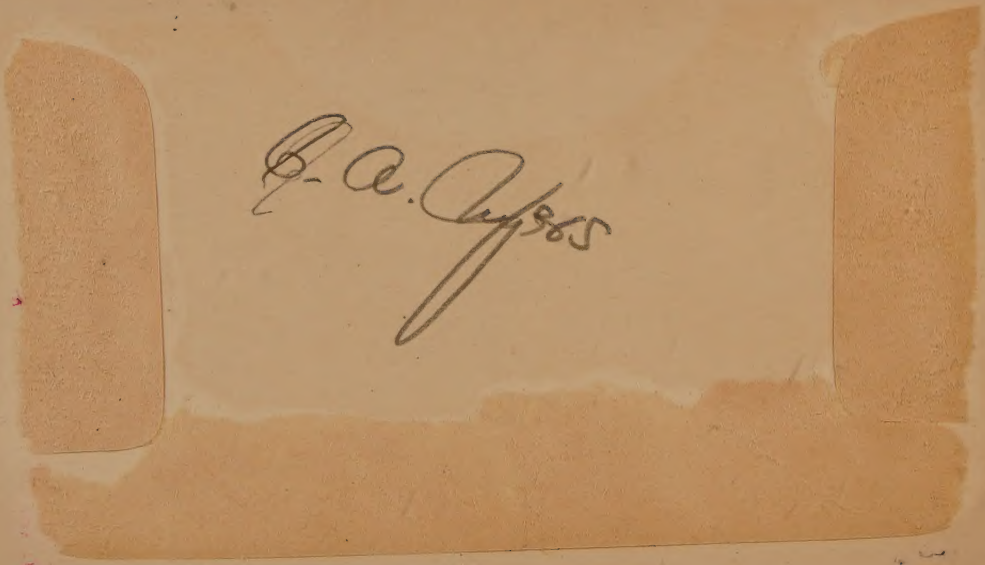
THE TRANSACTIONS OF OLIVER PRINCE



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By

ROBERT ERSTONE FORBES

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TO

CHARLES

WHO IS CONSTANTLY ENJOYING
SOME IMPROBABLE ADVENTURE
OF THE KIND HERE RECORDED

THE TRANSACTIONS OF OLIVER PRINCE

CHAPTER 1

YOUNG Oliver Prince, late Midshipman in the Royal Naval Reserve, was marching very rapidly up and down one of the busiest streets in Bournsea. He wore a dark blue suit and a light cloth cap perched jauntily at the true Beatty angle. His hands were thrust deep down into his pockets, and there was a frown—rather a comical frown—on his forehead. In point of fact he was indignant and angry. A few minutes before, he had been watching a white schooner sail gracefully out of the harbour. The schooner, he knew, belonged to the Duke of Kirkaldy, who, according to the newspapers, was proposing to cruise slowly up the East Coast—an ideal holiday; whereas he, Oliver Prince, was fated next Monday to begin a dull commercial career in a bank.

Mr. Prince was not merely indignant and angry; he was inclined to be mutinous. The grandson of General Sir Oswald Prince, V.C., a hero whose name appeared in every modern *History of England,* forced to earn a paltry two pounds a week in a wretched little seaside bank! It was humiliating and—unnatural.

"Beastly," said Mr. Prince for the twentieth time, and increased his pace.

It was all so cruelly unexpected and unfair; unexpected because, hitherto, things had always gone so

well for him, and unfair because—well, to be handicapped in this way through no fault of your own *was* unfair. His old messmates were not being forced to accept fifth-rate positions. Stevens and Pumphrey had obtained regular commissions in the Navy. The Honourable Lavery Doune in all probability had more money than he could possibly spend. Ashley had gone into his father's business, and owned a fine car. Yet for himself nothing better could be found than this clerkship in a miserable bank.

He uttered a picturesque curse which he had first heard in Cape Town during a memorable cruise in H.M.S. *King Henry*. It really was beastly, all the beastlier because although people were constantly taking him for twenty-two or even twenty-three, his real age was nineteen years and one month. Legally speaking, he was not his own master. Of course nobody dared nowadays to treat him as a kid, but——

"Damnable," said Mr. Prince, and narrowly escaped destruction as a large automobile swept past him.

Couldn't they understand that Nature had never intended him for any such humdrum career? Hadn't they realized that his surprising adventures in the war, to say nothing of his ancestry, had totally unfitted him for any such work? A bank for *him!* For the fellow who had discovered that German spy on board, and been thanked by the Admiral? And a bank in Bournsea of all places, where nothing ever happened and dancing was considered unseemly! Yet as things were, he would be expected to go to that bank at the same hour every morning, and sit at the same desk,

and fill up columns in ridiculous ledgers! Why, surely, they must understand——

They *did* understand, and that was the worst of it. Both his mother and old Mr. Waynflete understood, but were powerless to help. Money was wanted, and, according to them, he was really in luck to obtain any job at all. Money was so badly wanted that his mother had been forced to take a lodger into their tiny house in a side street.

A lodger, if you please! And before the war they had been living in that jolly house on the hills outside Sandmouth, with a garden and a workshop and servants. Mr. Waynflete, of course, was not the ordinary lodger. He was a friend of long standing and a delightful old gentleman when you came to know him; but it ought never to have been necessary to take a lodger at all. In a decently-ordered world, they would have been able to buy a fine mansion in the country, and keep a car: as things were, his mother could barely manage to pay the weekly bills, and there was only that forty pounds of his own in the savings-banks.

And a black future.

Yet only a short time ago he had been dreaming of the day when a certain Admiral Sir Oliver Prince, K.C.B. (with a shadowy Lady Prince on his arm) would be escorting his mother, freed from all her financial troubles, into some such castle as that Duke with the yacht probably possessed.

Suddenly he stopped, and stared blankly ahead. He had reached the end of the narrow street, and

what was generally allowed to be the dirtiest harbour in England had come into view again. In front of him two fishermen were arguing indelicately about football. Away on the horizon a yawl was crossing the line. A tug was getting up steam near to that old submarine which was waiting to be scrapped. Young Prince, however, was not noticing these things. An eager look had come into his face. A new and startling Idea had broken into his thoughts. He lifted up his head and smiled at the skies. Then with a happy chuckle he rushed on to the quay, and sat down, and allowed his legs to dangle over the edge, and gazed down at the oily waters below. . . .

At first things were vague, and the Idea seemed to be hidden behind a job lot of old memories. He found himself thinking of a lighthouse to which, years ago, he had gone with his father. He had been mightily thrilled, but spoilt an otherwise excellent day by stupidly falling down its narrow stairway. He ought to have broken his neck, but miraculously he had escaped with a few bruises. Then he seemed to be in that ghastly railway accident which had killed his father and left him unharmed. That picture, however, quickly faded, and Mr. Waynflete seemed to be telling him stories of adventure. An incident at school intervened, and he saw himself winning that final round in the boxing competition. They had told him that he possessed not the smallest chance, and of course it had been a lucky blow of his; but he *had* won the competition, and it had been the proudest moment of his life. Well—almost. The affair with the spy

had perhaps been more thrilling. That, too, had been lucky, although the Admiral had told him that he deserved his luck. As Ashley had remarked, he had been devilish cunning. . . . Then those old memories seemed to be changing into visions of the future. Admiral Sir Oliver Prince, K.C.B., had been blotted out, but in his place there were other Oliver Princes—financial magnates or statesmen or peers. It seemed that there might be a Lord Bournsea who married a very beautiful girl (the face indistinct but surprisingly lovely), and lived in a marble house with billiard rooms and a swimming-bath and other luxurious delights. And then, as the Idea showed signs of becoming concrete, the marble house faded away to show him the *King Henry* after that scrap off the coast of Spain. The Captain was saying that he, Prince, had the luck of the devil. By rights he ought to have been killed, or at least badly wounded, but he had come through untouched. Well, he was one of the lucky ones, and he had only to trust to his luck to win through in life. Which meant——

It meant mutiny. Or, rather, it meant striking out for himself. The war had taught him to depend on his own wits. He could be devilish cunning when he chose. Ashley had said so. Besides, it stood to reason that he understood himself better than did Mr. Waynflete or old Carstairs who had offered him the clerkship. Naturally his mother understood very little about these matters. Two pounds a week would help her, of course, but if he were to go his own way——

A bank-clerk? It was ridiculous. The Idea re-

fused definitely to have anything to do with a bank except as a place where he could put the large sums of money he was going to earn by his wits. It refused to sanction any monotonous régime. It insisted on adventure and excitement and—well, that sort of thing.

"I've been forgetting my luck," he muttered. "I'll —I'll go up to London. To-morrow or Monday. Something 'll turn up. *It's got to!*"

He looked very fierce for a moment, and then laughed out aloud. . . .

No doubt it was all most improper. Love of adventure may be the prerogative of youth, but if you are called on to support your mother, and there happens to be a vacancy in the bank round the corner, your duty seems clear. You must go to that bank, and work hard, and take your fill of adventure inexpensively at the Picture Palaces. This, indeed, was the view taken by Mr. Waynflete that evening, when at a Council of Three Mr. Prince coolly announced his intention of going to London "to have a look round" before burying himself in a bank.

"It's sheer madness," said the old gentleman.

But Mr. Prince had come to the Council well primed. He had spent most of the afternoon sitting by himself on the cliffs, dreaming delightfully, it is true, of the rosiest future, but at the same time busily elaborating arguments which would have weight. His friends would help. There was Lavinia, for instance, the Honourable Lavery Doune, Lord Bellchester's eldest son. In the *King Henry* he had been able to

do Lavinia a good turn: well, help might be forthcoming from that quarter. Ashley, moreover, might be of assistance, and, if need be, he would go to the Admiral himself at Whitehall. The Admiral liked him. And it wasn't as if he were asking his mother to pay for this visit to London. He would be supporting himself, and would even be helping by his absence from Bournsea. Naturally it didn't cost so much to feed two people as it did to feed three.

"I've thought it all out," he told Mr. Waynflete. "I may not earn much at the beginning, but afterwards when I've met the right people——"

"It's nonsense," said the old gentleman.

Mrs. Prince, a kindly unpretentious woman, forever in a state of wonder at her handsome and brilliant and surprisingly adult son, was trying to understand. There were times in the past when Oliver had been "difficult," although no woman could have asked for a more affectionate son. But what was she to say of this new scheme of his? Was it really as mad as Mr. Waynflete seemed to think? The boy, so far, had done exceedingly well, and he had depended upon nothing but his own personality. She, too, had looked forward to a distinguished naval career for him, but when circumstances had made that impossible and her old friend Louis Carstairs had offered to take the boy into his bank, she had thanked Providence for the chance. Now, however, Oliver seemed doubtful about the bank, and she was prepared to believe him when he said that he could do very much better in London. On the other hand Mr.

Waynflete was definitely against any such project, and there was Louis Carstairs to consider.

"I think, you know," she remarked, "Mr. Carstairs might be offended."

"Mr. Carstairs," said her son loftily, as he smoothed his fair hair, "means well, but he doesn't understand. If you've been in the Navy——"

"But, look here, my boy," interrupted Mr. Waynflete, "d'you realize there's more unemployment in London than anywhere else?"

The boy looked at him, and there was a little scorn and considerable affection in his tones as he replied. "You needn't have a regular *job* to make money. If you're lucky, things come your way. Adventure and——"

"Bless my stars, but we're not living in the eighteenth century. You're not proposing to become a new sort of highwayman, are you? No, no, no. You must think of the thing soberly. You can't live on nothing in London. I've tried it, and know." He smiled rather sadly, and stroked his untidy grey beard. Mr. Waynflete was a failure, and knew it. Yet once a distinguished career might have been his. As private secretary to a former Lord Oxney—the Oxneys still reigned not twenty miles from Bournsea —he had had political opportunities of which a man of ambition would have taken advantage, but John Waynflete had always been a dreamy scholar, disinclined to assert himself, a negative person. Now with an annuity just sufficient for his needs, he spent his days writing a book on heraldry which would never

be finished. He was a tired old man who wore shiny black clothes, and whose fingers were stained by tobacco.

"But I shan't have nothing to live on, Mr. Waynflete, and I mean to get on. I want to meet people and see things. I'm quite old enough to take care of myself, and as soon as I earn any money, I shall come back and give half to mother."

"Yes, Oliver, but——"

The boy was smiling. "If you've been in the Navy," said he, "you've learnt to take risks. And it's my experience that if you don't take risks, you won't get far. I've been thinking it all out. It was decent of old Carstairs to offer me the job, and I thought I ought to take it because it did mean some money, but I'd hate the work, and I shouldn't get promotion, and—well," he added, while that comical frown surmounted a pair of very blue eyes, "I've definitely made up my mind. I *know* I shall succeed if I get to know the right people, but here——"

"But it's suicidal to go up to London on the off chance of—of getting on." Mr. Waynflete was trying to be angry—a very difficult matter, he generally found, with this attractive good-looking boy. "You've no business experience. None."

"No, but I've always been lucky."

The old gentleman put out a hand. "Really, Oliver, you're talking very stupidly indeed. What has luck to do with the question? Competition is far too keen these days in London for a country boy to make good. Money nowadays doesn't come from—er, adventure;

it comes from hard solid grind. A bank, of course, isn't thrilling, after what you've been through, but the war is over, and—oh, my dear boy, don't be pig-headed. You've nothing——"

"Forty pounds," corrected Mr. Prince, "and five suits of very good clothes."

(Yes, he had been right to take that Lieutenant's advice. Clothes made in Savile Row might prove a lucky investment now that he was not going to bury himself in a Bournsea bank.)

"But don't you think, dear," ventured his mother, "you'd better try the bank first?"

"I'll try the bank," promised her son, "if I fail."

Mr. Waynflete continued to protest against so mad a scheme, but the boy had made up his mind. In the time-honoured way he was going to seek his fortune in London, and if luck meant anything at all, and his old cunning had not altogether deserted him, that fortune was going to materialize somehow or other.

It was not perhaps a very dreadful mutiny, and when Mr. Carstairs was told, he did not seem as upset as Mr. Prince privately considered that he should have been. But the banker had known the youngster for years, and could not forget one or two practical jokes. Moreover he was not at all sure that the Navy in war-time was a good preparation for work in a bank. In any case, as he laughingly told Mrs. Prince, the boy was bound to get on.

"You really think so?" At this time Mrs. Prince was not attempting to conceal her anxiety.

"Of course I do. With a face like that, what finer letter of introduction does he want?"

On the other hand Mr. Waynflete prophesied disaster, and when Mr. Prince slyly remarked that it was the old gentleman who had first given him a taste for adventure, he shut himself up in his room, and pretended to sulk.

But when the actual moment of departure arrived on the Monday morning, he seemed just as excited as the boy himself.

"And if you get into trouble," said he with a chuckle, "just send a wire."

Mr. Prince assumed an air of great dignity. "I'm not going to London to get into trouble," he replied. "I'm going to make money."

His mother was trying to smile. She was thinking of the day when Oliver had first left her to join his ship. "Write every day," she whispered, and pressed three pound notes into his hand.

Mr. Prince felt that he had already become almost a millionaire.

CHAPTER II

It is recorded that an enterprising young man once hired a plainly furnished office in the City and the services of a very small boy. He caused his name to be printed in large letters on the glazed door, and—waited for something to happen. For a week he dozed peacefully enough during office-hours, and the boy devoured a larger number of gory romances than he could usually manage in the time. There were occasional visitors, but all of them were strictly uncommercial. The young man had no particular notion as to the kind of business that he wished to transact, but hoped for the best. Then one day a South American gentleman called and mistook him for an importer of Dutch bulbs. He did not immediately discover his mistake. The young man duly imported bulbs, and from that moment never looked back. He finished a blameless career in the House of Lords.

Now Mr. Prince was firmly resolved to make his fortune in London, but details of any methods which he proposed to adopt had not yet presented themselves. Money would flow into his coffers somehow or other, but just how or by what agency this agreeable phenomenon was to take place, he did not know. It was enough that he had definitely cut himself off from the bank. Things, he felt, would just happen. They al-

ways had happened. He was one of the lucky ones. He would just find himself embarked on some curious adventure, and then he would draw on that cunning of his, and rake in the shekels.

And as luck would have it, adventure began less than half an hour after he had left Bournsea.

As the train glided out of the station, it seemed to him incredible that he had ever agreed to work in a bank. Here he was a gentleman at large—in a third-class compartment, it was true, but at Oxney Junction he had every intention of changing into a first. Everything was to be of the best. And once again he could believe in his own star. He was completely his own master. . . .

Yes, there was Sandmouth, that grey speck away to the right, and in a few minutes' time he would be hurtling through its station. Then a straight run to Oxney, where he would change into the London express, and then——

At Oxney Junction something extraordinary happened.

To reach the London train he was obliged to cross by a subway. He was about to submit his ticket for inspection when the stationmaster happened to see him, and in defiance of all etiquette, seized hold of the small bag he was carrying, and with extreme politeness hurried him to the train.

"Just in nice time, my lord," said he, as he opened the door of a first-class smoking compartment in which a smartly-dressed young man was sitting; "and your other luggage, my lord?"

Afterwards Mr. Prince considered that he had behaved very coolly.

A porter, he explained, had his other bag. Yes, this was a most comfortable carriage. The day could not have been finer, and with reasonable luck they might hope to be at Waterloo upon time. A shilling was about to change hands when it occurred to him that a half-crown might better fit the occasion.

The stationmaster was obviously delighted, and showed no signs of departing. "And her ladyship?" he inquired. "I hope she is well, my lord?"

Mr. Prince could not help noticing that the young man opposite was showing interest. "Very well, thank you," he replied, and silently hoped that the train would start without delay.

"You must excuse me, my lord," the stationmaster was continuing, "but we always say here that no one could believe the Countess of Oxney was your mother."

Mr. Prince smiled as naturally as he could. Even outside Oxney, he was thinking, there were numbers of people who would never have believed that the Countess was his mother. But it was necessary to say something. The young man, he could see, was listening. "My mother," he admitted, "does keep surprisingly young." He took up his *Daily Pictorial,* and the stationmaster perceived that he had been dismissed.

"Good morning, my lord, and thank you."

The door was closed, a whistle was blown, and the London express started upon its hundred mile run.

Mr. Prince looked at a picture of maidens pretending to bathe, but his thoughts were elsewhere. My

lord this and my lord that, and his mother the Countess: why, it was all like a lopsided dream! How on earth had it happened? He had never before been taken for that young Earl of Oxney who only a few months ago had been celebrating his coming-of-age. But was he so like the fellow? He supposed he must be, and smiled. It was rather good fun to be taken for an earl, and his thoughts twined themselves into an absurd little phantasy of the future, when he would really be the Earl of Bournsea, travelling first-class as a matter of course, and having stationmasters to carry his luggage. And then it seemed as though he had really and miraculously been transformed, and actually *was* a young peer—in fact Lord Oxney himself, who was popularly supposed to have almost as much money as the Duke of Kirkaldy himself. And this young peer, of course, was going to London to speak in the House of Lords, or to visit his vast properties in Mayfair. He would stay at the Ritz or the Savoy, and drink the most expensive wines, and order as many suits of clothes as he liked, and dance every night. . . . It was really rather a pity that the carriage contained only one other passenger. But so long as somebody was there—— "My name? Oh, er, Lord Oxney." That was what he would say, should they get into conversation. He was not likely to meet the young man again, so a little deception wouldn't matter.

And how amused Mr. Waynflete would have been! The old boy had actually spent years of his life at Oxney Towers.

It was the greatest fun, even though there was no

possible chance of the stationmaster at Waterloo making the same mistake.

Mr. Prince mechanically turned over the pages of his newspaper, and with a little shock realized that he was looking at a portrait of the Countess of Oxney herself. What a curious coincidence! His blood seemed to be suddenly tingling. He had not even reached London, and yet already a sort of adventure had begun! He stared at the portrait. At its side was one of "A Society Bird's" paragraphs.

"Amongst the latest arrivals at the Ritz is the beautiful Countess of Oxney, who tells me that she is in town for a few weeks before leaving for America. Young Lord Oxney, whose coming-of-age was recently celebrated, prefers his ancestral home to London, and proposes to remain at Oxney Towers for the glorious twelfth."

Mr. Prince re-read that paragraph half a dozen times, and smiled to himself. Then he looked out of the window, and tried to compose some exciting yarn for Lavery Doune or one of the others. They would want to hear what he had been doing, and a little exaggeration would do them no harm. Besides——

"Very dusty for motoring." The young man opposite had suddenly spoken.

Mr. Prince politely agreed.

"Just had a breakdown near—near your place."

"Bad luck," said Mr. Prince, remembering in time where his place was.

"Couldn't help hearing your name, y'know. Fortunately found a decent garage. In the trade myself." He smiled deprecatingly. "Have to do something these days, y'know. Demobbed and all the rest of it. So I opened a garage. London. Hire out cars; that sort of thing. Any old hour. Pays, too."

"Ah!" Mr. Prince continued to show a polite interest. "So you hire out cars?"

"Here's my card. Might come in handy, y'know. Never know your luck, do you?"

Mr. Prince smiled as he took the card. He glanced at it, and learnt that Major Gilbert Farnham guaranteed a car at any hour of the day or night on the most reasonable terms. "Thank you," said he, as he put the card into his pocket. "I often do want a car." Then he turned his head, and looked out of the window again. He was aware that Major Farnham wanted to continue the conversation, but there were important matters to decide. Another Idea had presented itself; a bold Idea. In Bournsea he had made no definite plans where he should stay in London. The Ashleys might put him up, but they were often out of town, and in any case he would feel freer in a hotel. But—which? There were, he knew, very cheap hotels in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury, but —if he were to go, well, why not?—if he were to go to the Ritz, he might possibly meet this beautiful Countess, and perhaps be able to tell her of the absurd mistake that had been made, and interest her, and in some way or other to manage to——

The best people would certainy choose the Ritz in preference to Bloomsbury.

"I'll go," said he to himself. "Hang the expense."

And so it happened that about four o'clock that afternoon a taxicab drew up in Arlington Street and deposited Mr. Oliver Prince at the Ritz Hotel. He allowed a gorgeous being to take his bags, and walked into the hall. An attic, he had decided, would suit him, and there was no necessity to feed in the hotel. He would stay a few days and trust to luck. Yes, here he was in London, at the smartest of London hotels, an ex-naval officer with crisp bank-notes in his pocket. There was no need to be nervous. He was not nervous; not nervous at all. He had come up to London to seek——

"Roddy, what on earth are you doing here?"

The boy turned. A tall beautifully-dressed woman had come up to him, and was staring. Then she uttered a little cry. "Oh, I'm—I'm so sorry. I thought . . ." She seemed half-amused, half-frightened. "Do excuse me, but I thought you were my—somebody else."

He smiled. "I was taken for Lord Oxney a few hours ago," he said.

"Taken for Roddy? But——" She stopped and turned to look at a dark man who was watching them from a seat nearby. "You know," she said with a nervous laugh, "I don't know who you are. I'm Lady Oxney. I—it seems so . . . Who took you for Roddy?" she demanded.

"The stationmaster at Oxney Junction." Mr.

Prince was feeling slightly uncomfortable. The attendants were obviously waiting for instructions. A man in a frock coat had come out of the reception-office, and was hovering uncertainly a yard or two away.

"Oh, but—my dear boy—I mean—are you staying in the hotel?"

"Yes, for a day or two."

Again she was staring into his face. "Extraordinary," she murmured, and then jerked up her head, looked at the dark man again, seemed to be in doubt what to say or do, and finally laughed out aloud. Mr. Prince grinned. He, too, was in doubt as to what he should do. Things were happening too quickly even for him. Lady Oxney, he thought, certainy did not look old enough to be his mother, particularly when she was laughing. He admired her grey dress and the way she had done her hair. And there she was, the Countess of Oxney, staring at him! He would have to say something, but—what?

"You know, I don't—I don't know what you must think of me, but—they'll be wanting to take your luggage upstairs. Couldn't you—why, of course you could!" She had brushed a hand over her hair. "Couldn't you just wait a minute before you settle things? I've—I've had the most extraordinary idea. Yes, just wait here, will you? Do you mind? I'll explain in a moment. It's so *odd,* isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," agreed Mr. Prince awkwardly. What was going to happen now?

"But I can't——" She stared at the frock-coated man, and waved him imperiously away. Then she ordered the gorgeous attendant to put down the bags. "Do please sit down for a moment. I want——" She seemed to become suddenly vague, but her fingers were pointing to a chair, and as in a dream Mr. Prince sat down. He saw her turn away and walk up to the man who had been watching. He knew they were talking about him. He thought:

"It isn't me. It's somebody else. I shall wake up."

Then he lit a cigarette, and looked about him.

He had come to London to make money—money for a new house and dresses for his mother as splendid as the one which this strange Lady Oxney was wearing. "Money," he muttered to himself, and remembered that he was devilish cunning. An adventure had begun. . . .

Three minutes later the dark man came up and offered his hand. "May I introduce myself?" he said in a pleasant voice. "My name is Clarence Elton. Lady Oxney has asked me to present her apology for our mistake. Yes, mine too. We both took you for Lord Oxney. The likeness is extraordinary, you know. I suppose you've never seen him?"

"No," replied the boy, wondering whether he liked Mr. Elton or not.

"Well, it's wonderful. Hair, eyes, nose, mouth—oh, everything! The exact image! You can imagine how startled we were. It's like one of those doubles you read about in novels. I wouldn't have believed it possible."

Mr. Prince smiled. "It's funny nobody has ever taken me for him before to-day."

"But, I suppose—I suppose you're not often on leave?"

Mr. Prince stared.

"You're in the Navy, aren't you? Surely!"

Mr. Prince shook his head as he smiled again. It was clever of the fellow to spot his former profession. "No, I've finished with the Navy. No chance of promotion."

"Of course not. I see. Er—have another cigarette, won't you?" He held out a gold case.

"But—oughtn't I to be seeing about my room?"

"Oh, that's all right. We—it's all so astonishing, running across you like this, I mean—and Lady Oxney wanted to know whether you'd have tea with us. You can fix things up with the hotel people afterwards. We were just going upstairs for tea when you arrived."

"Thanks very much, but—they may not have a room."

"Don't you worry about that," Mr. Elton assured him. "They know me well enough to fix matters up all right. Leave your things where they are, and come along upstairs. Do you generally stay here when you're in London?"

Mr. Prince explained that this was his first visit to the Ritz.

"Oh, well, don't you worry about a room. I'll see to that. By the way, would you tell me your name?"

Mr. Prince gave his name.

"Good. Then we'll join Lady Oxney, Mr. Prince. She wants to ask you all sorts of questions."

They went up in a lift. They came to a splendid room overlooking the Park, apparently one of a private suite. Tea was laid on a little brass table by the open window. Mr. Prince was given a cup of delicious China tea and bidden to eat a dishful of sugared cakes. A successful play was being discussed, but he was conscious that they were both staring at him, and became slightly indignant. It was a delightfully unexpected adventure, but—why had they invited him upstairs? He might be the image of Lord Oxney, but——

"I know exactly what you're thinking of, Mr. Prince." Lady Oxney abruptly changed the conversation. "You're thinking we're very odd people."

"If he is," remarked Mr. Elton laughing, "I don't wonder at it."

"I don't think I was," said the boy, and knew that he was enjoying himself. Downstairs, perhaps, he might have been somewhat nervous, but here—it was the greatest possible fun. Just like lunching with the Admiral. His luck was undeniably in. To what other fellow would this sort of thing have happened? And of course they would be staring at him. If a mother mistook a fellow for her own son——

"Oh, but I'm sure you were, and I don't blame you. I suppose it is rather odd to invite a complete stranger to tea. It was very nice of you to come. You see, I feel as though you were Roddy's twin, somehow, another boy of mine whom I'd forgotten all about.

How ridiculous I am! But you know what I mean. It *is* queer; just like a play, in fact. I wonder—— Well, I suppose you're almost Roddy's age?"

Mr. Prince was minded to agree, and then for some reason or other gave his real age.

"Nineteen?" repeated Mr. Elton, who seemed greatly interested. "I should have said twenty-two."

"And where are you—I mean, are you in London for long?" Lady Oxney was leaning back in her chair.

"Well, I really don't know. I've come up from Bournsea to have a look round."

"For a holiday?"

"Not exactly. You see, I haven't yet decided what I'm going to do. For a living," he added, and noticed that Mr. Elton's stare had intensified.

"What sort of work did you think of taking up?"

"Oh, anything that comes along, I suppose." Mr. Prince helped himself to another cake. "At least, as long as it brings in money, and doesn't mean sitting at an office-desk all day long."

"Something more—exciting?" suggested Mr. Elton.

The boy nodded.

"Splendid," said Lady Oxney. "I should think an office-desk would be dreadful after the Navy. You want something different. I felt sure you did. No," she added, "I couldn't imagine you in an office."

Mr. Prince's heart warmed towards her. Obviously she was a woman who understood things. "They wanted me to go into a bank," he told her.

"Ridiculous!"

"So you've got to earn your own living?" observed Mr. Elton.

"Rather," said the boy. "We've got no money at all."

"Too bad, but we're all in the same box nowadays." Lady Oxney was looking out of the window. "I never have a penny to call my own."

Mr. Prince could not help smiling. How absurd! The Oxneys were "rolling."

Mr. Elton was lighting a cigarette. "I'm afraid," he said, "you must be rather extravagant, if you come to the Ritz."

Mr. Prince looked at him. "Well, I thought I might as well come here as anywhere. Something's bound to turn up."

"How do you know it will?"

"Why, it's turned up already!" exclaimed Lady Oxney.

"My meeting you?"

"Yes, and being taken for Roddy."

"I suppose it has. It's rather a joke, isn't it?"

"It might be more than a—joke."

The boy turned quickly in his chair to look at Mr. Elton. A change had come into the dark man's voice: he was suddenly serious. "In what way, Mr. Elton?"

There came a tiny pause. Mr. Elton was looking at his cigarette. Lady Oxney had assumed her vaguest expression.

"Do you realize that the hotel people will naturally take you for Lord Oxney?"

"*They* take me for Lord Oxney? Why should they?"

"Roddy often comes up for a night or two," interposed Lady Oxney languidly.

"And they saw you talking to us, and coming upstairs with us."

"But surely——"

"Would you mind very much, Mr. Prince, if you *were* taken for Lord Oxney?" Mr. Elton was looking at him very intently.

"Would I mind?" Mr. Prince did not know what to say. Of course he would not mind in the least. It would be the greatest fun. But why had the question been put? He could not understand why Mr. Elton was looking at him in that way. "No," he admitted, "but why——"

"There!" said Lady Oxney, and laughed rather shrilly. "What did I say? I knew you wouldn't mind. Roddy's a dear. And people do make mistakes. Quite the absurdest mistakes. And that," she continued, speaking quicky and almost at random, as it seemed, "and that was my extraordinary idea. The one I had downstairs, when I saw you standing there by the door. I'm always getting the quaintest ideas. Quite suddenly, I mean. You wouldn't believe——"

Mr. Elton was smiling. "I believe," he said, "we could do you a good turn. Financially."

Mr. Prince stared.

"Yes, but Lady Oxney doesn't want to be worried

with business. Suppose you and I take a stroll in the Park?"

(So they had invited him to tea for a particular purpose! He ought to have known so much at once. Well, he would have to use all his cunning. They were going to make some sort of a proposal. He would accept it, if it appealed to him, but if it didn't——)

He was shaking hands with Lady Oxney, but did not hear what she was saying. In the corridor outside he lit a cigarette but it seemed to be somebody else who was smoking. Once again he was in the lift, but this time only with Mr. Elton. The queerest affair was about to happen, although he had not a notion what it might turn out to be. But that he was embarked on an adventure altogether out of the ordinary could not be doubted.

He felt a little drunk.

Five minutes later he was walking in Green Park, and listening to an astonishing proposal.

That night Mr. Prince lay in a huge and most comfortable bed, and endeavoured to understand what had happened. He had begun the day in the tiny house in Bournsea. At the junction he had been mistaken for Lord Oxney. He had come to the Ritz Hotel where the same thing had happened. He had met Lady Oxney who was charming, and Mr. Elton who was—a little mysterious. He had had tea with them. And then in Green Park had come that strange proposal. He could not remember exactly how Mr.

Elton had led up to the proposal. He could not understand how he had come to accept the proposal so quickly and without careful thought about the possible results. And yet the thing had seemed inevitable. He had known at once that he would accept.

In some curious way his dream in the train had come nearly true. Everybody was taking him for Lord Oxney: would he agree, for a fee, to masquerade as the peer so long as he remained at the Ritz?

That had been Mr. Elton's proposal.

And he had accepted.

In fact, to all intents and purposes, it *was* Lord Oxney lying so snugly in this huge and most comfortable bed. It *was* Lord Oxney who had dined in state, and drunk as much champagne as was good for him, and talked perhaps rather more about himself than he had intended, and been let into the secret that Lady Oxney and Mr. Elton were engaged to be married and—in trouble.

Which was why that proposal had been made.

They were in trouble, and in some way or other they required his assistance. As yet no detailed explanation had been given—"just a family affair," he had been told—but in the morning Mr. Elton was coming to see him at an early hour, and then he was to hear what Lady Oxney at dinner had described as a very remarkable story.

Already, however, he was fully aware that he would have to remain very strictly on guard. Once in the *King Henry* he had been tricked, but that was not going too happen again.

But ought he to have accepted?

Very decidedly not.

Something was wrong, not of course with Lady Oxney, but——

Well, if Mr. Elton attempted——

Let him!

This was the sort of curious adventure for which he had craved. And he had been promised a fee, his expenses and £25 in any case, £100 in the event of his active assistance being demanded and given in the "family affair."

A hundred pounds for being Lord Oxney!

He *was* Lord Oxney.

"I should have made a very poor bank-clerk," he reflected, and turned over and went to sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning Mr. Prince ate a huge breakfast in one of the public rooms, and accepted the rank and dignity which was thrust upon him with a very good grace. He enjoyed a few minutes' conversation with a gentleman who looked like an ambassador but really occupied a subordinate position on the hotel staff, and he thought that a lady with surprising red hair smiled graciously at him. He came to the conclusion that as a home the Ritz was in every way superior to the little house in a side street, and decided that when his fortune had been made, he would have a suite on the first floor reserved permanently for his own use. Meanwhile it was important to remember that he was the young Earl of Oxney who had just come of age: a fortunate youth, indeed, whom half the world might legitimately envy. No money troubles; a beautiful place in the country (near to which that Major What-was-his-name had broken down on the previous day); and, on certain occasions, a coronet and robes of scarlet and ermine in which to look mightily important. It was all exceedingly pleasant, and as he smoked a cigarette his only regret concerned those old messmates of his. He could hardly hope to be taken for Lord Oxney by them: but, if they chanced to come to the Ritz, he was hanged if he wouldn't pretend not to know them. "I'm

afraid you've made a mistake," he would say, slightly disguising his voice. "My name is Oxney. Whom do you take me for?" Or something of that kind. The trouble was that Ashley would be sure to burst into laughter, in which case he himself would never be able to keep a straight face. On the other hand, if anyone were to come in, he could retire to his own room upstairs.

(But he was not really his own master. He was in process of earning a fee, and in a very short while Mr. Elton would be explaining how that fee might be considerably raised.)

He sat in the lounge, and waited. . . .

"Hullo, my dear Oxney, so there you are." Mr. Elton, very beautifully dressed, had come up and was talking in loud hearty tones. "Sleep well? But of course you did. And your mother all right? Good. Then I suggest we take a stroll in Hyde Park."

Mr. Prince agreed, and they walked out into Piccadilly.

"Just the right kind of morning to sit in the Park," said Mr. Elton, as they turned in by Hyde Park Corner. He seemed in the best of good tempers. "What about over there by the statue? It looks delightfully shady."

So they sat near to Achilles, and in a little while Mr. Prince was listening with the greatest attention to a remarkable story. He had ceased temporarily to be Lord Oxney, and become the young man from Bournsea who desired, if possible, to be in a position to charge that higher fee.

Mr. Elton was at great pains to impress him, and he was undoubtedly impressed. Mr. Elton described a most pitiful family squabble, and appealed to Mr. Prince's sense of chivalry and love of fair play. One or two points, it is true, seemed to the boy to remain obscure, but how could he hope after so short if adventurous a career, to understand the niceties of high finance?

It was all very sad. The Countess of Oxney, it seemed, had long been the victim of a deplorable conspiracy on the part of her late husband's family. They had been working against her from the first. They had opposed her marriage. They had poisoned the mind of her husband. They had hinted and lied, and had finally succeeded in putting even her own son against her. Mr. Prince gathered that on his deathbed the late Lord Oxney had been forced by his three brothers to alter his will, with the result that his widow had been left with no more than a paltry three hundred a year.

"And I expect you can understand what that means."

Mr. Prince thought he could.

"It meant, of course, that she was placed in an entirely impossible position. She has a microscopic income of her own, but even with that, it was hopeless." Mr. Elton was scraping the turf with his stick. "Utterly hopeless," he repeated.

"But her son——"

"I'm coming to him. I've told you already that his uncles had put him against her. Well, nothing

she could say in her own defence was of any avail. It was made quite clear to her that her presence at Oxney would no longer be tolerated."

"But surely if——"

"I know what you are asking yourself. Why did the family adopt such an attitude, and what precisely were their accusations? My dear boy, it was nothing but envy, jealousy, narrow-mindedness. As you've probably seen for yourself, Lady Oxney is a joyous being in love with life. She has always wanted to surround herself with interesting people, but with people, mind you, whom the Oxneys could never understand. They're hidebound; they belong to the eighteen-fifties. Over and over again her actions have been misinterpreted merely because—oh, well, I want to tell you a plain story. If I talk about the Oxneys, I shall lose my temper. What I want to tell you is this. After her husband's death, Lady Oxney was hounded from her home, and forced to manage as best she could on a few hundreds a year. But she was popular. She had scores of friends. Her beauty was famous. After a period of mourning, she was invited out once again—not only by private friends, but also by public bodies who wanted her name for this or that purpose. Opening bazaars, presenting prizes, that sort of thing."

Mr. Prince nodded.

"Well, you can't do that on a few hundreds a year, and she was forced to borrow." Mr. Elton looked gloomily at his stick. "Unfortunately she borrowed from the worst sort of man. You see, at

that time we were not engaged. I hadn't the right to—to offer my advice and assistance. It was only after her affairs had got into the most dreadful mess that she came to me. And then—the irony of it!" He looked dolefully at Mr. Prince. "I don't want to worry you with my private concerns, but if she had only come to me a few months before, there would have been no difficulty at all. But as luck would have it, I had just lost my own little fortune, or at any rate the greater part of it, in one of those commercial speculations which, while sound in themselves, naturally fail if their promoter turns out to be a scoundrel. It was a nasty knock, I can tell you. I had to look out for a job, a pretty good job, too, if we were to marry. I must come into a goodish amount when an uncle of mine dies, but he's a hale old gentleman, and —well, to cut a long story short, I found a job, in America, and it is to allow me to take up that job that Blanche—Lady Oxney—has agreed to live in New York. But—just listen to what has happened! The New York position is highly paid, and once in receipt of my salary, there will be no trouble whatever in paying off all my wife's debts. But until that salary is forthcoming, there is no money for her. You can't go and live in a strange country without—oh, numberless things. And of course we are forced to borrow again. It is against our better judgment, but there is no alternative. We are forced to borrow, and what does Jacobs say?"

Mr. Prince was trying to resolve the muddle that had arisen in his mind.

"Jacobs, if you please, refuses to advance another penny unless I can give proofs of my uncle's intentions, which of course I can't"—Mr. Elton looked sharply into the boy's face—"or unless the present Lord Oxney agrees to stand security for his mother, which as I need hardly tell you, Oxney, who is a weak and spiritless fellow entirely in the hands of his uncles, refuses to do."

"Jacobs being a moneylender?"

"Jacobs being an old thief," said Mr. Elton savagely, "who charges unheard-of rates of interest."

There came a pause.

"And in what way," asked Mr. Prince, "are you thinking I could be of assistance?"

Mr. Elton looked at him for a few moments before speaking. "I don't want you to misunderstand me," said he. "I don't want you to think I'm asking you to do anything—wrong. This signature for which Jacobs is asking is the merest formality. At the end of the year my own solicitor will be instructed to pay Jacobs every penny that is owing to him. But if Lady Oxney's life is to be made at all bearable, and if we are to be married, the money must be obtained at once."

"I see. But does your uncle know you are going to be married?"

"Nobody knows except yourself."

"But wouldn't he help if he knew?"

"My dear boy," replied Mr. Elton, "my uncle is old Lord Hailsham who believes all the lies the Oxneys

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have spread. No words of mine would ever convince him that Blanche—— No, no, it's useless. We have discussed every possibility, but my uncle must be ruled out. There is nothing to do but to get Roddy's signature. Of course if he were to follow his own inclination, he would sign at once. But he's a coward, and so——"

The blood in Mr. Prince's body seemed to be bubbling. He hardly dared to look at Mr. Elton. "Yes?" said he, and hoped that he was not showing his excitement.

"If you—if you were to sign in his place——"

Mr. Prince thought it advisable to light a cigarette. The moment had undoubtedly arrived when he would have to be more devilish cunning than ever before. The seventy-five extra pounds seemed rapidly to be disappearing from view, and even the twenty-five did not appear to be certain. Yet he was not going to give them up without a struggle. "But wouldn't that be—forgery?" he asked.

To his surprise Mr. Elton burst into hearty laughter. "Forgery, my dear boy? No, no. It is no more than a formality, as I told you. It would mean nothing at all. If you like, I will take you to my solicitor who will tell you about the money that is coming to me in America. Oxney himself need know nothing about the transaction at all. That, you see, is the whole point. I only want time to pay, and that is the one means—— And put yourself in Roddy's place. Wouldn't you want to help your own mother?"

"I should," said Mr. Prince. "And as far as Lady Oxney is concerned, I should like to help her, but—would it be, well, straight?"

A stern look came into Mr. Elton's face. "No," he replied, "strictly, legally speaking, it would not. I admit it. But when you are fighting slander and lies, you must use any weapons you can. Morally speaking——"

"And this, I suppose, was the real reason why you suggested I should pretend to be Lord Oxney?"

Mr. Elton nodded. "Don't look on me as a scoundrel. I'm not really so bad as I'm willing to admit I may seem. I haven't told you a quarter of the insults to which Lady Oxney has been subjected. Your blood would boil. You would say: 'Anything to stop that sort of foul thing.' I don't set up to be a saint, but—and then your arrival there in the hotel! It seemed providential. We had just been wondering how we could get Roddy up to town, and there—apparently—he was! You see——"

Mr. Prince was exhaling smoke. "And I," he interrupted, "should get £100?"

"Guineas," declared Mr. Elton, hiding his eagerness.

There came a long pause.

"But my handwriting," began Mr. Prince at last.

"A very minor point, my dear fellow. And Jacobs has only seen Roddy once for a moment. Now you and I are men of the world. I am making an unusual request, but the whole matter is unusual. You can't follow the ordinary conventions in a case of this kind. And don't forget that I wouldn't have asked you to

help us, if I thought there was the slightest chance of anybody being harmed. It isn't as if Oxney would really be called on to pay. I shall pay myself. It's just the signature. Oxney. Your signature! Yes, do you know, even now there are moments when I can hardly believe I'm not talking to Roddy Oxney himself. It's luck—a tiny piece of good luck after a run of the most dreadful—— Prince," he finished abruptly, "will you help us?"

Luck? The word brought old memories to Mr. Prince's mind. Nothing but luck had brought him to the Ritz and introduced him to Lady Oxney and her fiancé. They were asking him to do something in which the risk might be small and the reward great, but of which no honest man would approve. And yet, were he definitely to refuse, the adventure would come to an abrupt end, and his luck would have failed. Was there then no way out of the difficulty? And—*would* it be forgery? Would it be the sort of forgery for which they arrested you, and took you to Bow Street, and put your photograph in the papers? Moreover, if he were to sign, and in the future the real Lord Oxney were called on to pay, wouldn't it serve him right? To leave your own mother in the lurch——

"And I wouldn't ask you," Mr. Elton was saying, "if I thought you were running the slightest risk yourself. But you won't be. To all intents and purposes you *are* Roddy Oxney."

(Exactly what Mr. Prince had been telling himself on the previous evening!)

There came another little pause, and then the boy shook his head. He was sorry, but——

"Well, think it over," continued the other easily. "We needn't settle until to-night. Let us talk after dinner. We shall be four, by the way. Little Doris Esmonde is coming, a young cousin of mine. Such a jolly girl. I think you will like her."

"And shall I be Lord Oxney to her?"

"Why, of course!" laughed Mr. Elton getting up. "In any case we stick to our bargain."

Mr. Prince smiled.

He spent the rest of the morning choosing ties in the Burlington Arcade.

Dinner that evening was a great success. Lady Oxney wore a wonderful gown. Mr. Prince thought that Doris Esmonde was the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his life. She had the loveliest brown hair, and a tiny nose, and her lips were just the sort of lips that he considered a really beautiful girl ought to possess. And she was such good fun. They became friends before the salmon was finished. Once or twice, it is true, he felt uneasy at the deception he was playing, but decided that when they had become *great* friends, he would be able to tell her his real name. She lived in Chelsea, and she loved the Navy. Mr. Prince curbed his desire to speak of the Navy from within—Lord Oxney, he knew, had been in a cavalry regiment—but he could not resist describing the Duke of Kirkaldy's yacht in considerable detail.

After dinner he sat with Miss Esmonde in a corner

of the lounge. They found much in common. Mr. Prince forgot all about the curious adventure upon which he had embarked. He forgot that Mr. Elton was waiting for an answer. He even forgot at moments that he was supposed to be a rich peer.

"I love dining here," said Miss Esmonde, "and, do you know, I don't think my father wanted me to come."

"Why ever not?"

"Oh, I suppose he thinks I go out too much, and then he's old-fashioned. And sometimes," she added, "I don't think he likes Cousin Clarence very much. Silly of him, of course, because Cousin Clarence is so amusing. And he dances beautifully. But you know what old people are."

"Is your father very old?"

"N-no, and he's the biggest dear in the world. But we do have rows. I suppose he enjoys them."

"I—I'd love to meet him," declared Mr. Prince.

"Well, of course you can." Miss Esmonde was obviously enjoying herself. She had been told that he was unduly reserved and surprisingly cold towards her own sex. But he wasn't cold at all—just the reverse, in fact—and it only showed you how difficult it was to believe people when they were talking about other people you didn't know. Instinctively she knew that this boy and she were going to become great friends. "You'd better ring up," she told him, "and invite yourself to dinner one night."

"Thanks most awfully. I say, you know, I'm jolly glad we've met."

Miss Esmonde was surreptitiously admiring the cut of his evening clothes. She hoped that he liked her own dress. Really he was the handsomest boy she had ever seen. And her father had told her that he owned the most beautiful house in the south of England. Perhaps she had expected to find him a trifle conceited. But he wasn't—not a bit. And Lady Oxney was delightful. "Are you really?" she asked. "But I expect you meet hundreds of girls."

"No, I don't," he assured her. "I don't particularly want to."

"I expect you say the same thing to all of them."

He stared, and then smiled. "We could have the rippingest times together," he said.

"But you're never in London."

"Er, no, I haven't been here much, but——"

Lady Oxney was beckoning to them.

"I think your mother is the most beautiful person in the world," said Miss Esmonde as they went upstairs. "I—I think I'd want to do anything for her."

Mr. Prince seemed suddenly nervous. He had been unexpectedly reminded of the real state of affairs. "Would you?"

"Yes, I would."

"Guineas, not pounds," thought Mr. Prince, and came to a decision.

CHAPTER IV

He came to his decision on a sudden, but before dinner he had spent a considerable time alone in his room, endeavouring to find some way at once of helping Lady Oxney who had been extraordinarily understanding and asked all sorts of questions about the Navy, and of stifling his own conscience. You couldn't get away from the fact that to write Oxney's name on a document would not be straight. Jacobs himself might be the worst sort of swindler, and Oxney, in spite of his war service, might be the most cowardly noodle, but—— But if he, Prince, were a paid servant, as of course he would be, he would just be carrying out instructions. Obeying orders. His employer required a name to be written, and was willing to pay——

No, that line of argument was useless. He would have to think of some other means of getting over the difficulty.

And then he had remembered those few words which Lady Oxney had whispered into his ear after luncheon.

"Sometimes the Law is utterly bad. You'd never believe how cruelly it has treated me. If I were a man——"

He had understood what she meant. If Oxney had

had a spark of manhood in him, he would never have allowed her to be slandered. She was just the sort of woman to be misunderstood. The Law! It meant nothing at all. It was merely a lot of rules made by old gentlemen to make things easy for themselves—just a word. The signing of Jacob's papers would be the merest formality—an exciting point in his adventure, a——

A lark!

What undergraduates called a rag.

And it would serve old Jacobs right for charging such interest.

Forgery?

Ridiculous. If you didn't take risks, you would never get far. Besides, where a woman's honour was concerned, the usual code did not apply. That was what Mr. Elton had been trying to say. Chivalry might make big demands, but they could not be ignored.

No, but——

He had smoked many cigarettes, and tried to devise alternative schemes for helping Lady Oxney, and asked himself a great number of questions, and even rehearsed his behaivour at Jacobs's office; but it was only in the lounge that evening with Miss Esmonde by his side that he came to his final decision.

He would have to be very bold, and very careful; but his mother wanted money. There were two women to help.

Well, he would help them.

And be devilish cunning again.

All the papers, it seemed, would be ready at Mr. Jacobs's office for Mr. Prince's signature. He had only to take a cab to Coventry Street at eleven o'clock the next morning, explain that he had come up to London "to see his mother at the Ritz," sign the papers, and take his leave. The £105 would be paid him in bank-notes the same day.

Mr. Prince agreed that when you came to look at it broadly, the whole matter was quite simple. Unusual, of course, and liable to be misunderstood, but —simple. He saw no reason why the little plan should fail, and proposed to return to the Ritz in time for luncheon.

Miss Esmonde was coming to luncheon.

Mr. Elton could not thank him enough. Lady Oxney showed her gratitude by a look and a pressure of the hand.

But he understood that the utmost secrecy was essential?

Mr. Prince quite understood.

And perhaps it would be as well if—Lord Oxney were to leave the Ritz Hotel soon after luncheon?

Mr. Prince saw the wisdom of such a proposal, and agreed to catch the four-thirty express to Bournsea.

He retired to his room five minutes after Miss Esmonde's departure. . . .

And the next day affairs went very well. Mr. Jacobs was apparently delighted to see the young Earl of Oxney, of whose coming he had been acquainted by telephone. His large form seemed to be oozing out a stream of complimentary puffs and

wheezes. He offered the youngster a large cigar, and explained that it was one of a brand which very few men in England smoked. Expensive, of course, but well worth the money. He spoke of the state of the crops, and only stopped talking when his visitor suggested that his time was short and there were papers ready to be signed.

The papers were produced, and Mr. Jacobs glanced carelessly at the young man's signature. He expressed a hope that he might be of service again on some future occasion, and after promising that the money should be paid into her ladyship's account the same day, said good-bye.

And luncheon at the Ritz that day was as successful as the dinner of the previous evening. Lady Oxney was radiant. Mr. Elton was very amusing. Mr. Prince thought that Miss Doris looked lovelier than ever in the daylight. He was sorry that he was obliged to go home before tea, but hoped to see her very soon again. No, he wouldn't be away from London for long, but—it was one of those wretched little business affairs which were constantly worrying a fellow. He obtained her address, and promised to write.

"I'll write to-morrow," he whispered.

At three o'clock he received twenty-one new banknotes.

At four o'clock he was driven to Waterloo Station, and travelled home first-class.

One hundred guineas earned in three days!

In the train he took pleasure in working out the yearly income which a man would receive at this rate.

Mathematics had never been his strong point, but there seemed no reason to doubt that it would mean considerably more than ten thousand pounds a year. Not a small income at all. In fact, quite a decently large income, and one which would definitely place him amongst the finanical magnates.

If, that was to say, it continued.

Well, it was going to continue.

Somehow.

He chuckled. The bank-people had suggested a salary of two pounds a week. Not even guineas; just two miserable pounds! Which would have meant a yearly income about equal to what he had succeeded in earning in three days.

And how? Merely by being devilish cunning!

Lord, how Ashley and the others would laugh when he told them the yarn! And Mr. Waynflete! At least——

A slight frown appeared on his forehead. He would have to be careful what he told Mr. Waynflete. The old boy might not approve of all he had done. And yet, looking at it broadly, what objection could there be?

Masquerading as somebody else? But—why not?

The frown deepened. He would just have some fun with the old boy, but what of Miss Doris Esmonde? He had promised to write, and he was going to write. In fact his fingers were itching to write now. There was so much that he wanted to say. Meeting Miss Doris had been easily the most exciting part of the adventure. But—he was begin-

ning to see that there might be trouble over the composition of that letter. At the Ritz the masquerade had seemed easy and natural, but now—well, how on earth could you tell a girl that you weren't the fellow she thought you? On a sudden the task seemed so frightfully difficult as to be almost impossible. She might so easily feel that he had made a fool of her. On the other hand he could swear her to secrecy, and she might enjoy that part of the affair. Girls liked to be told secrets. Nevertheless that letter would probably take the deuce of a time, just when he ought to be thinking how best to make that large income continue.

Well, but he was his own master again, and could spend his time as he chose. A few days' holiday. . . . All financial magnates were forced by their doctors to banish all thoughts of work every few months. And at home they could hardly expect him to go into the bank now. On the other hand he was not overworked, and he ought to be returning to London fairly soon. . . .

Yes, he would probably return some time next week, after Mr. Elton and Lady Oxney had sailed.

He did not particularly wish to see Mr. Elton again.

Though of course he would thank him formally for the money.

He would write to the man after he had composed a letter to Miss Doris. And then——

He was a little disappointed when the train ran through Oxney Junction without stopping. It would have been pleasant to be Oxney again for a few minutes. . . .

"But, my dear boy, I can't understand. You seem—— It's beyond me."

Mr. Prince was sitting back in Mr. Waynflete's chair blowing smoke-rings. His mother, astonished and delighted at his speedy return, had gone out to buy food.

"What's beyond you?" he asked. He was very pleased with himself now, and not at all eager to finish his account of the adventure. "I told you I'd get money, and so I have, in less than three days."

"Yes, yes, yes, but don't you see, there are . . . Good God, boy, don't you realize what you've done?"

Mr. Prince looked up very innocently indeed. "I've made a hundred guineas," he said, "and spent practically nothing at all."

"Yes, but at the cost of your honour." Mr. Waynflete looked greatly distressed.

"Honour?" repeated Mr. Prince. "But why shouldn't I pretend to be Lord Oxney if I want?"

The old gentleman put out his hands. "That isn't the point at all. Oh, if only I had known—— I could have told you the truth about that wretched woman. But it never entered my head that——"

"Wretched woman!"

"A hopeless spendthrift. Not a wicked woman, but utterly casual and selfish. She drove her husband to drink, and he was the jolliest—— Oh, and this man Elton—— Of course I can see the whole thing. They've made a pawn of you. I dare say she cried and made a dreadful scene——"

"Oh no, she didn't, Mr. Waynflete."

"Well, she would have done, if you'd given her half a chance. I know my lady well enough. In any case between them they've played a nice sort of game. Oliver Prince a forger!"

Mr. Prince was frowning in his comical way. "But, don't you see, that was only a formality."

"Formality be damned!" cried Mr. Waynflete angrily. "They've fooled you. And I blame myself for allowing you to go. Yes, I do. I blame myself bitterly. A boy of your age. . . . Oh, Oliver, couldn't you *see?*"

"I think I did see," replied the boy, and looked at his boots, "but I wanted to help, and when a woman's in trouble, you've got to do something."

The old gentleman was walking about the room. Suddenly he stopped, and stared at the boy. "You realize you can be sent to prison?"

"Prison?" said Mr. Prince, "but why?"

"A forger," announced Mr. Waynflete gloomily, "can be given seven years."

"But I keep on telling you it wasn't forgery. That old Jacobs will get his money all right and I——"

"Oliver, I thought you were a sahib."

"I'm under age," retorted Mr. Prince facetiously, "and I'm devilish cunning. And you must agree it was an awful rag. It was only when I saw what a good rag it would be that I went through with the business. And a paying one, too. You don't often get a hundred guineas——"

"Oh, can't you be serious for a minute? I don't

know what we can ever tell your mother. You have distressed me more than I can say. A forger!"

"But how can a man forge his own name?"

"You signed 'Oxney,' didn't you?"

"Of course I didn't, Mr. Waynflete."

"Eh, what's that? You didn't? But you told me you did."

Mr. Prince was smiling. The jolliest moment, he saw, had now arrived, and he settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "Oh no," said he, "I didn't tell you I did. I told you the papers were signed. So they were; they were signed by Lord Oxney, you see."

"Signed by—— You say——"

"Oh, it was all rather cunning, but then you do become cunning if you've been in the Navy. You see, I rang up Major Farnham—you remember, the man I met going up in the train—for a car, and got one at once, though it was nearly midnight. Elton had gone home of course, so he didn't know. And the Major came out himself, and drove me to Oxney. He's a jolly good sport, and I'm going to see him again when I go back to London. In fact I dare say he'd be able to put me on to a good thing. He's that sort of a fellow. Of course I had to tell him the truth, and he was most frightfully struck.

"Well, there was no traffic, you see, and we simply tore through the country. Never had such a run in my life. Then, when we did get to the place, we had to bang on the door for ten minutes before somebody came, and there was an awful fuss, and

they said I couldn't possibly see Lord Oxney, and I said I wouldn't go away until I did, and they threatened to send for the police, and the Major offered to get the police for them, and—oh, there was a fair old scrap. But I got my way, and Oxney came down, and you can't imagine how funny it was there in that huge hall, talking to a fellow exactly like yourself and dressed in a flaring red dressing-gown. We couldn't help laughing, you know. And then I knew I should like him. Of course he couldn't make out who I was or what I wanted, but I got him into a corner, and told him the whole story more or less. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I told him he ought to be ashamed of himself, preventing his mother from going to America with the man she was going to marry. Oh yes, Mr. Waynflete, I spoke to him like a father, and told him that Elton had said he was afraid of his uncles and all the rest of it. You can imagine what he felt. I think he was so surprised at what I had done—— Well, I was rather surprised myself, you know. I don't think I could do it again, but that's the best part of an adventure—a real adventure, I mean: you seem to do things without knowing how you're going to do them.

"And with Oxney, you see, I didn't really know what I wanted to say, but I told him I had a chance of earning a good deal of money, and I said it would probably be cheaper for him in the long run to sign now. Much cheaper, I said, to have Mr. Elton in America. And then he laughed again, and—oh, we understood one another well enough. I was nearly

calling him Roddy to his face! He told me all about his mother, but I'd guessed all that before. You do guess these things if you've been in the Navy." He laughed quietly to himself. "Yes, well, and then we fetched the Major in, and had a sort of meal, and Oxney dressed and came back to London with us, and we went to a Turkish bath, and got cleaned up. He had breakfast at Brown's Hotel, and went on to Jacobs, and then the Major took him home. And he actually paid for the car both ways! And I'm going to stay with him. Partridges and all the rest of it. And I met a girl. It's just luck. I'm one of the——"

He stopped.

It had been the greatest possible fun, teasing the old boy in this way, but the adventure, he had remembered, was by no means at an end. It could not end until he had made things right with Miss Doris. To be devilish cunning when you were dealing with people like Elton was comparatively easy, but with girls——

Mr. Waynflete was still staring at him. "Well, of all——"

Mr. Prince had started to hum a little tune. "I think I'll get something to eat," he said, "and then I've got some letters to write. I shall probably be here a few days, you know."

He smiled, and walked out of the room.

And Mr. Waynflete sat still in his chair, and tried very hard not to think of the days when he, too, had stood in the old Hall at Oxney Towers. . . .

CHAPTER V

Mr. Prince was right. Although he was not destined to hear much more of Mr. Elton and Lady Oxney, the adventure was by no means at an end.

Moreover, if it had begun remarkably well, during the next week it showed every sign of going remarkably wrong. It continued in so dolefully negative a way that Mr. Prince could take little or no pleasure even in so important an affair as the opening of an account in his name at the bank round the corner. True, he was temporarily cheered to receive a letter from Lord Oxney, repeating the verbal invitation to shoot birds later on in the year, and incidentally announcing that he had had a somewhat curious interview with his mother and future stepfather which, however, had "ended in a satisfactory manner to all parties," but—all the while Mr. Prince remained in a quite unusual state of depression.

His mother noticed it, and fretted. Mr. Waynflete noticed it, and wondered whether he had been told the whole truth. Oliver was a strange sort of boy, he was beginning to see. Apparently took a sort of perverted pleasure in being wrongfully accused of forgery. But—no fool. Undoubtedly had his wits about him, and was the sort of youngster who might

make a big success of his life. Then why this gloomy demeanour?

"He ought to have a regular job," the old gentleman told himself. "I shall have to find him a job. This kind of affair is all very well, but it mustn't continue. I shall speak very seriously to him."

But he did not speak very seriously to him. Instead, he waited to see what would happen.

Nothing happened, except that the boy's depression grew more marked.

For this state of affairs Miss Doris Esmonde was responsible, a fact all the more curious inasmuch as never before in the whole course of his existence had a girl managed to cause Mr. Oliver Prince any worry at all. He had met all sorts of girls, and liked them. They had been jolly good fun. You danced with them, and gave them chocolates, and took them out, and—sometimes you kissed them. Mabel Ashley, for instance. . . . He had kissed her on three separate occasions. And there was that topping Anstruther girl whom he had met at Mr. Carstairs's house: he had been awfully keen—for a time. But even if there were quarrels or misunderstandings, you didn't sit in a chair, and stare at the carpet, and feel as though you were going to have indigestion.

Yet just because he had thought it right to tell Miss Doris the truth——

Had it been the wrong sort of letter?

Each morning, when no reply came, he became more fully convinced that it had. Yet what other kind of letter could he have written? He had simply told her

the truth, and gone on to explain how much he had enjoyed being with her, and how greatly he was looking forward to seeing her again, and—well, one or two of those things you naturally wanted to say to a girl with whom you had palled up.

Perhaps he had been unwise to call her his Dear Doris, but "Dear Miss Esmonde" would have looked so stupid and stiff. As it was, any girl ought to have enjoyed receiving his letter. It was the jolliest sort of letter, which contained a most thrilling demand for the greatest secrecy, and had taken him a whole morning to compose.

Eight whole pages, in fact!

Yet she had simply ignored it. Not a line from Chelsea or anywhere else.

Moreover, there was not the slightest chance of his having made a mistake in the address. He had gone to the post office, and consulted a London Telephone Directory.

And here he was, tied down at home, a man with a considerable banking account of his own, eager to go back to London to earn other (and possibly larger) fees by his cunning, and yet unable to move very far from the house in case a letter should come.

It was lamentable.

Worse, it was childishly silly. If he wanted to hear from the girl, and she didn't write, why wasn't he rushing up to London to see her himself? She had asked him to call, hadn't she? Of course she had. Then why didn't he go?

There seemed no reason at all.

He just didn't go.

And then at a moment when he was deciding that fellows who put an end to their own misery need not necessarily be insane, a letter arrived—and made matters worse.

The rottenest letter.

A single sheet of large writing, addressed to Dear Mr. Prince!

The boy took it with him on to the quay, and did his valiant best to read into its few sentences rather more than was there. The letter, in point of fact, merely informed him that Miss Esmonde had received his letter and been considerably surprised. It declared her intention of attending several dances in the near future, and expressed a hope that the weather at Bournsea was fine.

Mr. Prince sat on the edge of the quay, and frowned down at the dirty grey waters. Just then the world seemed a dismal place. The acquisition of large sums of money seemed unnecessary if not actually objectionable. Adventures in London were simply dull, however cunning you might choose to be, unless, perchance, you really did commit forgery or murder or —suicide.

"I'm through with it all," he growled to himself, and almost decided to go into the bank round the corner, and add up figures for the rest of his life.

At that very moment, however, a small dinghy put off from a ketch that was lying at anchor in the harbour, and came towards him. He watched two sailors fasten their boat to the quay and idly examined their

kit. The magic initials R.Y.S. crossed their jerseys, but, much more important, their caps bore the legend "Best o' Luck."

But of course! He was one of the lucky ones himself! They had told him so hundreds of times. Things always went right for him. And quite suddenly he realized the wholly satisfactory fact that she *had* replied to his letter. She needn't have acknowledged those eight pages at all! Yet she had written, and if her letter had been cold, well—it must have been a pretty big shock to learn that he wasn't Lord Oxney at all. Of course! In a sense, in a conventional sense, they were still strangers. Naturally they would have to begin at the beginning again.

He rose up in considerable excitement, and rushed back to the house.

A second letter was despatched that day to Dear Miss Esmonde. It was posted in time to catch the London post, which meant to say that she would receive it next morning at breakfast. A reply *could* reach him the same evening, if she were to write off at once, but it would be wiser to wait for the morning after, before allowing himself to be worried.

He waited in patience for two days, and was rewarded by receiving a second letter distinctly more cordial than the first. It was cordial enough to make the future seem considerably less black. In fact he was able to busy himself once again with mathematical calculations about capital and investments. Yet it was not wholly satisfactory. It was not the letter

which Mr. Prince told himself he really deserved. It was not a letter to send him at once up to London.

He walked on to the hills behind Bournsea, and thought very hard, and decided to try the effect of a third letter.

Four days later he was thrilled at breakfast to read an invitation to Dear Oliver to call whenever he happened to be in the neighbourhood of Chelsea.

He looked up at his mother, and endeavoured to hide his excitement.

"Afraid I shall have to go up to London again," he remarked, and managed to produce a very creditable frown. "I'd better catch the ten-thirty this morning."

"Yes, dear?" Mrs. Prince was not wholly deceived, although she had no idea that such a person as Miss Doris Esmonde existed. "Don't forget to take your thick overcoat this time."

"More adventures?" Mr. Waynflete looked up from his paper.

"Er—no. I've still got to attend to one or two matters which—er, belong to the old one."

But, as it happened, an entirely new and most unexpected adventure was to superimpose itself on the old one and to add not a little to the recently-opened account at the bank round the corner.

CHAPTER VI

In the corner of the lounge of the Savoy Hotel an unusually handsome youngster was sitting alone. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon, and several people were watching him with considerable interest. They all saw him look eagerly up every time that the big doors swung round to shoot a newcomer in from the Strand, but by no means all drew the same conclusions. An old gentleman who was pretending to read the *Financial Times* amused himself by trying to picture the girl for whom the boy was waiting. Of course he must be waiting for a girl; he had that look, compounded of excitement and a badly-concealed irritation which, according to the old gentleman, was peculiar to youths who had been kept waiting for more than the legitimate ten minutes. And he chuckled to himself. Time had been when he would have waited an hour himself. . . .

As it happened, the old gentleman was wrong, and so was a lady who sat near to him. She was a large elderly lady who belonged to Chicago and had married Cornelius Welkenberg—the third richest man in that astonishing city. She had been admiring the boy's good looks, and debating with herself the possibility of his being a lord. He corresponded very well with

her ideas of a lord. This was her first visit to Europe, and as yet she had not made the acquaintance of a British nobleman; but the illustrated papers had allowed her to see much of Britain's aristocracy through the camera's eye, and this boy—— She decided that he was a Viscount. A Viscount ranked lower than a Marquis. Was that right? In any case this one probably owned a beautiful place somewhere away in the Welsh mountains. She drew fanciful pictures of an old moated castle which had belonged to his family from the days of William the Conqueror.

He might even be a descendant of that glorious monarch, for he bore, she told herself, a certain resemblance to that dear Prince of Wales.

Like Mrs. Welkenberg, a tall thin man near the entrance was trying to "place" him. The boy's clothes, he saw, had obviously come from the neighbourhood of Savile Row. He had the air of a sahib. There was nothing to connect him with the City or the stage, and absence of moustache precluded the Army. A junior naval officer perhaps? Apparently he was staying in the hotel. Probably some rich idler.

The tall, thin man scowled. Just then he was not in a mood to be able to think of a rich young man with equanimity. Only that morning he had drawn his last ten pounds from the bank. He was not staying in the hotel, and if he had been asked why he was sitting in the Savoy lounge, he would not have been able to give a satisfactory reply. In point of fact, Captain John Ridley, late of the Southshires, was out of a job and near to desperation. A month

ago he had managed to win money at Newmarket, but at the moment there was nothing but ten pounds left —ten pounds and a small square box in his pocket which contained something of potential value. And so the sight of a young man in beautiful clothes, lounging at ease, obviously rich and unworried, gave Captain Ridley no pleasure at all.

The youngster, however, was not waiting for a girl, and he was neither rich nor unworried. He was not a peer, and so far from living in a moated castle, circumstances had forced his mother to take a lodger into her very small house in a side street in Bournsea. And Mr. Prince was in London with the express intention of driving out to Chelsea in order to visit Miss Doris Esmonde.

He had been in London for two whole days, but he had not gone to Chelsea.

And now as he sat in the lounge he was thinking how curiously unpleasant it all was. In the London train he had looked forward to an immediate visit to Miss Doris. He had seen himself asked to stay for dinner, and possibly offered a bed. He had figured a most wonderful week, during which Miss Doris and he would be hugely enjoying themselves. And yet, fifty miles from London, he had suddenly become aware that her invitation had not really been couched in the warm terms he had supposed. In fact, each time he had looked at the invitation, it had become colder. At Waterloo it had been icy: the merest politeness. She had no real desire to see him again. She had simply been playing a game.

Well, he was the last sort of person to thrust himself where he wasn't wanted.

Driving to the Savoy, he had argued that she needn't have *asked* him to call, if she hadn't wanted to see him again; but although a rich luncheon had removed some of his doubts for a time, he had not been able to make up his mind to drive out to Chelsea.

And during the next twenty-four hours he had wandered about the hotel, and done nothing.

How frightfully difficult it was to understand women! Long ago in the *King Henry* Ashley had said so; now he was seeing for himself. You simply couldn't fathom them. They didn't seem to work on a plan, or think about things in an orderly way. And you never knew what they meant. Probably they didn't always know themselves.

And what was the use of going to Chelsea if they were no longer pals?

She didn't really care whether she saw him again or not.

He certainly wouldn't think of going.

In fact, he would blot her out of his memory.

Absolutely.

He was in London, not to see any chit of a girl, but on business. That was why he had come to the Savoy Hotel. Business.

But there was no business to be done. None. And it really was rather rotten, because at the Ritz Miss Doris and he had been the best of good pals. He had never been obliged to think about what he

should say to her: words had just come. They had understood each other almost at once. In fact, they might have known each other all their lives. She had been exactly his sort.

Mr. Prince sighed. She still was exactly his sort, if only——

And just because of that stupid affair, because he was plain Mr. Prince instead of an earl, she could treat him in this way! It was all the more ridiculous because she had told him she was keen on the Navy, and his first letter to her had laid stress on the fact that he had served in the *King Henry,* whose exploits no doubt would be familiar to her. But she had made no mention of the Navy in any of her letters to him; she had simply ignored its existence. It was enough to make a man swear never to——

His thoughts were jerked rudely aside. A huge, red-bearded farmer-like man in untidy clothes had come into the lounge from one of the adjoining rooms, and after glancing casually about him, had caught sight of Mr. Prince. For a moment he stared doubtfully, and then with a chuckle of satisfaction he marched up to the boy.

"Hullo, young Oxney, my lad, and what brings you to London?"

There was no question about Mr. Prince's surprise. Neverthless he managed to remain his usual cool self. Several ideas passed at swallow-pace through his mind. Who on earth was this man with the red beard which stuck out so queerly from his face? He had seen him somewhere before, he thought, but

where? The question, moreover, of his own identity, momentarily disturbed him. Ought he to announce his real name? (Somehow a voice inside him seemed to be whispering a definite "No.") Most important of all, however, was the possibility that here might be the beginning of another adventure.

Mr. Prince remained cool, but the red-bearded man must have noticed a slight hesitation on the young man's part, for he laughed very loudly as he shook hands. "You remember me, don't you?" he went on in his hearty way. "I'm Kirkaldy. We met at the Wintons."

Of course! He must have seen portraits of the Duke of Kirkaldy hundreds of times in the illustrated papers. And only a week or two ago he had been watching the Duke's yacht sail gracefully out of the harbour at Bournsea. That was the time when he had come to his great decision not to go into the bank. He had been envious of this Duke who could take a holiday whenever he chose, cruising from harbour to harbour, doing exactly what he liked. And here he was, making the same mistake that the station-master had made at Oxney Junction and Lady Oxney herself at the Ritz Hotel! It was really very odd.

(The Wintons? He hadn't an idea who they might be. Probably some very rich folk. He was certain he had never heard their name before. But he could find out all about them, if necessary, in one of those big red books which told you all about people with titles.)

He managed to smile. "But I didn't expect to see

you here," he said cleverly. "I thought you were cruising up the East Coast."

"So I was, my boy, so I was; and at Holy Island they wired me to come back at once, damn every one of them. Why can't they leave a fellow alone?" He had sat himself down in the next chair, and was offering the boy a cigarette. "And now," he went on plaintively, "I may have to stay here four or five days. It's the most ridiculous nonsense. Can't think why they wanted me here at all. House shut up and all the rest of it. Trustees, my boy, are the very devil. Yes, you can take it from me. Devils. Can't stand 'em. Never know what they want, and expect you to obey orders just as if you were at school again. 'Pon my soul, if I had my own way, I'd drown the whole lot of 'em. Interfering old fools. Well, thank the Lord, I've met somebody I know. London in August 's like nothing on earth. You staying in the hotel?"

"Oh yes, for a few days." Mr. Prince was trying to think. Here was the Duke of Kirkaldy talking to him like an old friend, and the Duke of Kirkaldy was supposed to be one of the richest men in the kingdom. He owned whole counties up in Scotland. There were priceless collections in his castles, and he was related to Royalty. And that white yacht of his was the rippingest yacht ever built.

"Good, then I shall see something of you. To-night I've got to dine out with an aunt—she's about ninety and the most awful old dragon, and I shan't get anything to eat but cold beef, but I must go, or there'll be the devil's own rumpus. But to-morrow,

my boy, we'll amuse ourselves. We'll lunch together, and—hello, there's my lawyer fellow again! Now I wonder what he wants at this hour?" The Duke looked almost scared. "Good God, he's followed me here! I shall have to listen to him for another two hours." He sighed. "Well, see you later on. If I don't, to-morrow here in the lounge at one." He laughed loudly again, winked at Mr. Prince, and lurched off.

The boy continued to sit where he was. Obviously another adventure had come his way. He would have to be mightily careful, of course, because the Duke of Kirkaldy would not be wanting to follow Mr. Elton's example and seek his help. On the other hand there was no reason why he shouldn't enjoy himself at the Duke's expense. If people chose to make silly mistakes——

He thought of Miss Doris.

Would she expect him to blurt out the truth at once?

She probably would.

He ought to explain—to-morrow at lunch. Even before lunch. Naturally the Duke wouldn't want to stand lunch to a stranger.

But they weren't strangers!

It was really most difficult to know what to do.

He sat there, and was ignorant of the fact that those who were watching him were more interested than ever in his identity. Mrs. Welkenberg from Chicago was now fully convinced that her surmise about his rank had been correct. She had just been

informed that the red-bearded man was the Duke of Kirkaldy. The Duke and the boy were obviously friends. Old friends. She smiled to herself. It ought not to be very difficult to make the young man's acquaintance.

And Captain John Ridley was not unaware of the red-bearded man's identity. He, too, sat on and watched, and thought very hard, and in a little while came to the conclusion that he had been wise to come to the Savoy Hotel.

CHAPTER VII

In the American bar a cocktail was being prepared for Mr. Prince. He was not particularly fond of cocktails, and five minutes ago he had had no intention of visiting the bar. He had fully decided to drive out to Chelsea. But for some reason or other the visit to Chelsea seemed to belong to to-morrow or the day after, and there was nothing to do before dinner. Also this was a special cocktail whose acquaintance he had first made in Cape Town.

There were not many men in the bar, but Captain Ridley was there, and he seemed to be greatly interested in the barman's methods of mixing his ingredients. "Something new?" he inquired, and it would have been difficult to say whether he was addressing the barman or Mr. Prince.

"It's a Durban Joy," announced the barman.

Captain Ridley looked at Mr. Prince, and smiled. "That *is* new to me," he said pleasantly. "Your own invention?"

Mr. Prince explained how he had first come to try it.

Captain Ridley opened his cigarette-case. "I should like to follow your example, and try one," said he, and produced matches. "I'm always out for adventure—in drinks as well as anything else. I've a catholic

taste." He laughed quietly to himself. "Finest drink I ever had in my life"—he paused, and looked up at the ceiling—"well, no, not that one perhaps. I was thinking of a time when we couldn't get any water, and my throat was like a burnt cork. That was in the Sudan, but it was only a question of finding something wet. The *finest* drink I ever had was the one they gave me on board the old *Triumphant,* five minutes after they'd let me out of Turkey."

"A prisoner?"

"I should say so. And not in the first division either. Johnny Turk was not very modern in his ideas about prisons."

"No, I've heard one or two bad accounts."

"And I'd be willing to bet a fiver you haven't been told a hundredth part of the truth. Talk of hell! Why—well," he went on, "I was taken at Kut, and I expect you know what that meant."

"But do tell me. I haven't heard very much."

"Sure it won't bore you?"

"Rather not. You see, I expected to go out to Constant. myself, but they sent us in the *King Henry* to Cape Town instead. That was after the scrap, of course."

"The one off the Spanish coast?"

"Yes." Mr. Prince looked pleased.

"Lord, well, I don't suppose you missed much. However, if you want to hear, I don't mind yarning a bit. I've nothing much to do. You see, after Kut——"

There followed a highly exciting account of the

horrors of Turkish prisons. Captain Ridley, it seemed, had undergone incredible hardships. He had attempted to escape by simulating madness, and succeeded in being taken to Constantinople, and escaped from the hospital there, and starved, and been recaptured, and taken to a hell-upon-earth where half his fellow-prisoners went mad.

"Nowadays," he finished, "I can hardly believe it, but we were literally treated like curs. And then, when the Armistice came, and we saw your fellows steaming into the Porte, you can guess what we felt. They had cocktails ready waiting. Lord, I wanted to fall on their necks. On leave now?" he added, as he drained his glass.

Mr. Prince admitted that he had now left the Navy.

"No chance of promotion these days in your service, and precious little in ours. I resigned my commission last year. Don't know if it was wise, though," he added thoughtfully. "It's so difficult to know what to do. Sometimes I think I'll go back to Turkey. I know their lingo, you see, and . . . I say, have another, and let's sit down if you've nothing better to do."

Mr. Prince sat down, and drank another cocktail, this time at Captain Ridley's expense. And in a little while he was on the best of terms with this ex-prisoner of the Turks. Names had somehow come to be exchanged, and mutual compliments paid to their respective services. Captain Ridley told more yarns of his hardships, and asked for particulars about the famous exploits of the *King Henry*. Whereupon Mr. Prince

told of his never-to-be-forgotten encounter with the German spy, and gave a concise account of the Spanish scrap which he had found in one of the newspapers, and imitated one or two of the Admiral's facial peculiarities. Captain Ridley told him that he ought to go on the stage, and wished that he himself had some parlour trick at his command. But a public school education and nothing else didn't seem to help a man much in these days, and——

"Think I saw you in the lounge just now," he remarked, changing the conversation, "with the Duke of Kirkaldy."

"Oh yes," said Mr. Prince.

"H'm, I wouldn't mind having his money."

"Nor would I," agreed the boy heartily.

"The fact is I've never been so hard up in my life." Captain Ridley was lighting another cigarette.

"I expect we're all in the same box."

The Captain looked at him curiously. "*You* hard up?" he asked.

Mr. Prince, feeling confidential no doubt, admitted that he had come to London to replenish his purse.

Captain Ridley expressed surprise, and then remained silent for so long a time that Mr. Prince began to wonder. He liked this Captain Ridley, but that was hardly a reason for allowing the man to learn any details about his own financial position. On the other hand could it matter very much?

(It might have been fun to give Oxney's name instead of his own.)

Suddenly Captain Ridley jerked himself up in his chair. "Look here," he said, "let's have another. I believe——" He was staring very hard at the boy. "Are you really here to look for a job?"

"Well, it depends on what you call a job."

"I mean, are you really here to make money?"

"Yes."

Two more cocktails were ordered. Then:

"Don't think me impertinent," said the Captain, "but do you know the Duke of Kirkaldy well?"

Mr. Prince smiled. "Oh, I don't know," he said modestly. "Not particularly. We're lunching together to-morrow."

"I see. The fact is——" He was fumbling in his pocket. "I've got something here I think he might buy. Isn't he supposed to have one of the biggest collections in the world of old silver and gold and that sort of thing?"

Mr. Prince was not sure.

"Well, I've been told so. Look here." He had taken from his pocket a small square box. "There's a little drinking-cup in here which doesn't look very valuable, though it is. It's Turkish, and it's made of gold, and it's about three hundred years old. It's one of a set which belongs to the Sultans, and is only used, as far as I can make out, on special religious occasions. Nobody outside Turkey has ever seen one —I mean, except the people I've shown this one to, but the collectors know of their existence, and I believe one of the books has a picture of the whole set." He

had opened the box, and was holding out a handleless cup heavily chased. "That little cup," he went on, "is worth anything you like, and it's mine."

Mr. Prince admired the delicate workmanship, and handed the cup back. "Solid gold?" he asked.

"Solid gold," repeated the Captain in a low voice, "and you'd never guess how it came into my possession. No, but many curious things happened in Turkey during the last few weeks of the war. Our position wasn't so bad then, but if you'd told me I'd be moving heaven and earth to get a *Turkish* prisoner out of prison while the war was still on, I shouldn't have believed you. But he was a white man, was Damad Pasha, with an honourable wound, and I'd a fairly long score marked up against Dowlat Effendi, the prison Commandant and a senior Colonel, although I don't suppose he'd ever heard a big gun fired in his life.

"Well, Damad belonged to one of the best families in Turkey—I rather fancy he was a cousin of the Sultan's—and he had become one of my gaolers. He taught me Turkish, and I taught him English, and we became friends, chiefly, I expect, because we both loathed the Colonel so much. Dowlat, yes. If ever we meet in hell—— No matter. I want to tell you about this cup. One day Damad came to my room, and I knew at once that something was wrong. He was in an awful state. He told me he had come to say good-bye. A terrible thing had happened. He had suddenly been accused of embezzling a large sum of money, and admitted that things looked very black

against him. I was almost as upset as he was, and made him give me all the details. Well, things did look black, but I absolutely believed him when he told me he was innocent. He was taken to Constantinople, and that was the end of our lessons. I never expected to be able to help him, but shortly afterwards Dowlat sent for me, and almost before I got into his room, I knew that Turkey was done for. I can't tell you how I knew, but I did. There was a change in the fellow. He had always been cunning, but now the cunning was mixed with a new sort of politeness. And then it turned out that their War Office wanted a few British officers who knew Turkish to help on things in Constant. until an armistice should be signed. You can imagine the sort of thing, and—would I go? Naturally I said 'Yes,' and then, what d'you think? That old fool asked me to fix up some business for him in Constant., and actually gave me proof of his guilt with regard to poor Damad's affair. Of course he didn't know that I knew anything about it, but you can imagine what I did when I reached Constant. And after enormous trouble, and with the help of General Townshend himself, I was able to secure Damad's release."

He paused. "Rather dramatic, wasn't it? I don't know what happened to Dowlat, but the evidence I possessed was so complete that Damad had to be released, and he was so damn' grateful that he gave me this cup, which had been presented to his grandfather by Abdul Hamid years before. I didn't realize at the time what a valuable gift it was, but a Major

friend of mine who understands these things told me it was worth anything up to a thousand pounds!"

He looked at Mr. Prince. "A thousand pounds! Well, naturally I didn't want to sell a present like that, but——" He shrugged his shoulders. "I've got to. And I'd be willing to sell for £500, if I could find the right man."

There came another little pause.

"Have you tried any of the dealers?"

"Dealers!" cried Captain Ridley with scorn. "They're the biggest thieves in the world. They'd probably offer me a hundred, and sell it for a thousand. Oh no, you don't get me doing business with a dealer."

"So you want to sell it privately?"

The other nodded. "Look here," he said, "if you want money, I might be able to do you a good turn. Service men like ourselves ought to stand together. It was that Major friend of mine who mentioned the Duke of Kirkaldy as a possible buyer. If you showed him the cup, and persuaded him to buy it for £500, there'd be—er, £50 for you."

Mr. Prince woke up with a start. His thoughts had been in Turkey, but suddenly, it seemed, romance had given place to finance. He was being offered a commission. It was necessary to be very cunning. "May I see the cup again?" he asked, and took it into his hands, and closely examined the chasing. It was really a most beautiful piece of work. He knew nothing whatever about such things, but its beauty could not be denied. On the other hand £500 seemed

a preposterous sum for one small cup, even if it happened to be three hundred years old and made of the purest gold.

"Well?"

"But the Duke might not know its true value."

Captain Ridley smiled. "I tell you, my boy, all collectors know of the existence of this service, but most of them can't afford a big price these days. But your friend——"

Mr. Prince was thinking. It would be bad enough having to explain to the Duke that his name was not Oxney—he supposed he would have to—but it would be worse still to try to sell him a cup which might be worth very little. Yet if it were so rare a piece—— "I'm not sure," he was beginning, but the Captain interrupted.

"Look here," said he, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Of course there's no question about the genuineness of the cup. The Duke will know its value as soon as he sees it. You're lunching with him to-morrow, and I'll see you here in the morning, and lend you the cup. What about that? I had thought of advertising," he added, "but if I did, the dealers would be on to me like a shot and—well, hang it all, one doesn't want to parade one's poverty. If I wasn't absolutely on the rocks, I'd never dream of asking you——"

"But wouldn't it be simpler for you to go to the Duke?"

"No, because he'd naturally think me a dealer. He'd think me a dealer even if you were to introduce me. No. Show him the cup casually, and tell him

a pal of yours wants to sell it—tell him, if you like, how I got it—and doesn't want to have anything to do with the dealers. Oh, you know the sort of thing to say."

"And there'd be fifty pounds for me?"

"Yes, if you got rid of it. That's ten per cent."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," promised Mr. Prince, and found himself shaking hands. Later on he was dining at the other's expense. Captain Ridley, he found, was really a most entertaining talker.

CHAPTER VIII

It was after dinner that evening that Mr. Prince conceived the idea of telephoning to Chelsea. A half-bottle of wine and Captain Ridley's conversation had brought him into a rather more optimistic mood. After all, he had been invited to call, not on any particular day, but just when he found himself with nothing to do, and not too far from Chelsea. The Savoy Hotel was no more than two or three miles away, and a taxicab——

But if he were to hear Miss Doris's voice before seeing her, it might be helpful. He would be able to discover from her tones whether they were still pals or not.

"Hullo, Doris," he would say, and then find out whether she knew his voice at once, or had forgotten it, or pretended not to know it. And if she sounded unfriendly or stiff or coldly polite, he would postpone his visit for a day or two. The telephone call, at any rate, would inform her of his arrival in London.

And so with an assumption of boredom, he shut himself up in a telephone box, and was lucky enough to get through to Miss Esmonde almost at once.

"Hullo, Doris."

"Hullo—Oliver."

And then, curiously enough, Mr. Prince lost all sense of nervous hesitation. The telephone had never been so friendly before. He could almost see her at the other end. It seemed incredible that he had been in London for more than two days.

"Well," came the voice of Miss Esmonde, "I've just finished dinner."

"So have I."

"Are you coming round?"

"When? Now?"

"Yes. There's nobody here except father and Aunt Mabel. I'll give you some coffee, if you're not too long."

"I say, I'd love to."

"Well, do."

"And, I say, Doris, are you wearing that pink dress?"

"Of course I'm not. You don't suppose I dress up for Aunt Mabel? And you don't think I'm going to dress up for—you?"

Mr. Prince's excitement was growing. "I say, you know, I want to explain things. Your letters——"

"If you want any coffee——" There was a sharp crack, and he was cut off. But he did not mind very much. He waited for a moment or two, to see whether she would speak again, but when he heard a voice, it was a harsh bass which demanded to know the number he required. He walked out and was taken up to his room, where his hair received a final brush and his black tie a final readjustment.

In the taxicab, it is true, he was conscious of some

perturbation. On the telephone she had been extraordinarily friendly, but then somebody might have been in the room with her. In which case, of course, she would have had to disguise her real feelings. Well, the best thing would be to behave as though he had never pretended to be Lord Oxney at all. Probably he would have no opportunity of seeing her alone this evening, and in any case he would have to make himself pleasant to the aunt. On the other hand Doris might have told her father what he had done, and Mr. Esmonde might be one of those men who would want to know every detail and who would ask awkward questions.

But would he? Mr. Prince would be his guest. He probably wouldn't.

And even if he did——

"I shall make them laugh," Mr. Prince told himself, and sat back in the cab, and looked at himself in the tiny mirror that faced him.

He need not have worried. He had not been in the Esmondes' house for three minutes before he was feeling thoroughly at home. Miss Doris had apparently forgotten the coldness of her letters, and behaved like a very old pal. Aunt Mabel, too, seemed delighted to see him, and Mr. Esmonde, who was a high official in the Foreign Office, was a splendidly handsome man who laughed and joked as though he had forgotten to grow up.

They sat in a beautiful oak-panelled room, and the coffee was delicious. Mr. Prince, reclining at ease in an enormous arm-chair, could not understand why

he had ever hesitated to come. There, actually in front of him, was Miss Doris, in a pale yellow dress which suited her even better than the pink frock she had worn at the Ritz. And she looked lovelier than ever. He could hardly believe that he was really in her father's house. . . .

"And I hear," remarked his host, "that you're no longer in the Navy."

"No, there isn't much chance nowadays unless you've got all sorts of influence."

"It's rather a shame," declared Miss Doris.

"I think you're wise," said her father, "but what are you going to do? High finance?"

Mr. Prince looked up quickly to see whether Mr. Esmonde was laughing at him, but his host seemed in earnest. "I don't really know," he said: "it depends. I've come up to have a look round."

"Good. We could do with some young blood."

"There *is* money to be made, Mr. Esmonde," continued the boy, wondering whether a private interview with the girl was too much to hope for, "if you're lucky enough to meet the right people."

"Ah, but that's the problem! Who are the right people? But do you think you're one of the lucky ones?" Mr. Esmonde was smiling.

"I think I am," replied Mr. Prince smiling too. He looked shyly at Miss Doris. "Only to-day——" He stopped. The fifty pounds was still a long way off, and he did not want to boast before comparative strangers.

"Only to-day—what?" asked the girl.

"Well, you see, if my luck holds I shall be £50 richer to-morrow than I am to-day."

"Fifty pounds!"

"And all for selling a little drinking-cup!"

"A what?" asked Mr. Esmonde.

"Just a little gold cup."

"I see. Fifty pounds, eh?"

"It seems a very large sum for a cup," observed Aunt Mabel.

"Oh, but that's only my commission. The cup is very old, and it used to belong to the Sultans of Turkey. And it's worth £500 at least."

"God bless my soul!" cried Mr. Esmonde, who seemed greatly impressed. "Who the dickens has £500 these days to buy a cup?"

"Well, that's the point. I don't know if I shall be able to sell it, but I'm seeing a man to-morrow who collects these things, and he's awfully rich, and the man to whom it belongs says that it's really worth a thousand."

"I wouldn't mind earning £50 so easily every day." Mr. Esmonde was lighting a fresh cigar.

"You'd be able to keep me in clothes if you did," remarked Miss Doris.

"You're a wicked ungrateful child," said her father.

Just then Mr. Prince fell in love with Aunt Mabel, for that lady suddenly raised her voice. "Now I won't have any quarrels to-night." She chuckled. "Doris dear, won't you take Mr. Prince to the billiard-room, and give him a game? I'm sure he plays."

"You play?" cried the boy. "I'm frightfully keen."

The girl looked almost as pleased as himself. "Rather! I can give father twenty and beat him."

"Don't exaggerate, my child," said Mr. Esmonde. "You know I allow you to win."

"He doesn't," laughed the girl, rising up. "He's a wicked old parent who allows his only daughter and heiress to go about in rags."

"Is he?" said Mr. Esmonde, highly amused. "Well, run along, the two of you, and don't forget to bring Mr. Prince to the library for a whisky-and-soda before he goes."

There followed what Mr. Prince honestly considered was the most delightful hour he had ever spent in his life.

The game opened in a business-like way, and the girl soon showed her prowess. Obviously she had been well coached, and almost at once Mr. Prince saw that he would have to play very seriously indeed if he intended to beat her. He wanted to beat her, but at the same time he wanted to talk about those letters of hers.

"I say, you know," he said, after a while, "you do play well."

"Do I? It's your turn to play, you know."

"Yes, but—I wanted to ask you about—you know, those letters of yours."

She looked at him very innocently. "What about them?"

He stared for a moment, and then took a plunge. "Doris, did you think me a beast for pretending to be——"

"I shall, if you don't go on playing."

"No, but—I mean—about——"

"Old silly, it was a glorious rag. I howled with laughter, and I was just going to tell father everything, when—when I didn't," she finished abruptly. "So now you can go on playing, and if you fluke——"

He had moved nearer to her, and taken hold of her arm. "So it's really all right?" he asked, and looked into her eyes. "We're really pals?"

"You're hurting my arm."

"But are we really pals?"

"Didn't I ask you to call?"

"Yes, I know, but it was rather a rotten letter. I mean, they all were."

"Were they?" She was trying to look severe.

"You know they were."

There came a tiny pause. He was still holding her arm, and looking intently at her, but she had turned her face away, and now seemed to be measuring invisible angles between the balls on the table. "I'll try and write a nicer letter next time," she said at last. "But not if you don't go on playing at once."

"I say, Doris, I'm—you are a ripper. Let's write every day. I'll tell you all my adventures, and you——"

"Get on with the game," ordered Doris, "or I'll—I'll call father."

So Mr. Prince endeavoured to concentrate all his attention on the game, and managed to win by fifteen points, after which he made her sit down with him on a settee, and with a boldness which afterwards

frightened him, took hold of her hands, and pulled her towards him, and gave her a kiss. She called him a brute, but he explained that he had beaten her at billiards, and was therefore entitled to a prize.

"Besides, we're pals. And you've got such ripping hair."

"You didn't kiss my hair!"

"No, but don't you like being kissed? I say, I must kiss you again. Just one."

"If father knew——"

"But he needn't know—yet."

"Ol—iv—er! Remember we've only met three times in our lives."

"I know. Isn't it funny? Doris, you do make a fellow——"

He stopped, and they hurriedly fell apart. The door was opening. Mr. Esmonde appeared.

"Finished your game? Good. Then I'll take Mr. Prince off to the library before he goes, to talk finance, and you, my girl, can go to bed."

His girl pulled a face. "He treats me like a baby," she complained to Mr. Prince. "Well, good night. Come again soon, and I'll beat you."

They shook hands very formally, and Mr. Prince followed his host into the library.

And there they talked of many things, and Mr. Esmonde proved to be such an interesting talker—quite as entertaining as Captain Ridley—that it was after midnight before his guest went.

As he drove back to the hotel, Mr. Prince thought that it had been a truly remarkable evening.

CHAPTER IX

At an early hour the next morning Mr. Prince made the acquaintance of Mrs. Welkenberg of Chicago and her husband, a little wisp of a man with silver hair and a ring round his tie. The large lady collided rather violently with him in the lift, and seemed afraid lest she had seriously hurt him.

"I guess," said she, "I'm the worst kind of elephant, but these elevators of yours give me the jumps."

She seemed so upset that he felt bound to accept her invitation to the Welkenberg suite, where he was speedily made acquainted with the American way of doing things. Mrs. Welkenberg had poured out her family history almost before the door had closed behind him. She had just married off her only daughter to a man almost as rich as her husband. She had come to Europe to spend money and enjoy herself. Meant to see what little old England really was like, and might persuade Cornelius to buy a castle. Cornelius liked pictures and things of that kind, but she preferred people. "Your dandiest folk," said she, and stopped, and looked round the room, and seized hold of a large dish of muscat grapes.

"Now these, I guess, are almost the best your conservatories can pro-duce. Please help yourself, and——"

She was demanding his name.

Mr. Prince gave his correct name, and was amused to be asked what particular prefix should be applied to it.

"Oh, just plain Mister," he told her, and wondered what would have happened had he given Lord Oxney's name.

"Mister!" boomed Mrs. Welkenberg. "Say, now, and I was certain you were a lord!"

Was she disappointed? Mr. Prince thought that she was, and did not know what to say. He could not continue to eat grapes, and he wanted to get away; but Mr. Welkenberg seemed to be guarding the door, and his wife obviously desired him to stay.

"It's a queer place, though, this England," she went on. "I never know who or what your folk are going to turn out to be. Look at your friend the Duke of Kirkaldy! Why, he looks like a hired man!"

Mr. Prince smiled.

"I guess he's one of your richest lords." Mr. Welkenberg had opened his mouth for the first time.

"Yes, I suppose he is."

"Well, a man's no different, I guess, for being a Duke."

"Cornelius, be quiet. I want to ask Mr. Prince all sorts of questions."

And ask them she did. They were embarrassing questions, some of them, about the peerage in general and the Duke of Kirkaldy in particular, about Royal etiquette, and about his own family and future profession. He had never been asked so many questions

in his life. But there was something very jolly about the large lady, and Mr. Prince came to the conclusion that he liked her. In fact he accepted her invitation to dinner that evening.

After which he rushed away to keep his appointment with Captain Ridley.

Already he had made his plans; very cunning plans. The sort of plan that would allow him to have great fun with Mr. Waynflete when he returned to Bournsea with more money, and related how he had earned it. Yes, the plans were certainly going to bring him in £50, if not more. At the same time he would have to be very careful. The luncheon with the Duke might lead to much, but it might lead to nothing. A false step——

No, there were going to be no false steps. His good luck was not going to desert him.

He found Captain Ridley in the lounge, and immediately invited him upstairs to his own room. "We don't want to be overheard," he said, "and apparently you don't want to meet Kirkaldy. I think perhaps you're right. If he did get it into his head you were a dealer—— No, much better keep out of the way."

So they went upstairs, and there was considerable discussion before the precious cup was handed over into Mr. Prince's keeping. Captain Ridley, it seemed, did not want to be seen by the Duke, but he did wish to remain in the hotel until such time as the transaction had been either completed or definitely rejected. Mr. Prince declared that the cup would be perfectly

safe in his hands, and believed that undue hurry might ruin everything. He knew the Duke, he said, and his careful ways. Some little time and considerable pressure on his own part might be necessary before the cup actually changed hands. The Duke might want to consult a book or something of that kind. You couldn't rush these things through in five minutes.

Captain Ridley agreed, but frankly admitted that he wanted to know the result at the earliest possible moment.

"Of course you do," said Mr. Prince, "but you must give me time. I shall probably be with the Duke most of the afternoon. I'm dining with some Americans, but I shall be with the Duke until I dress for dinner. Give me until to-morrow morning. That will just be time enough to work out a little scheme I've got for dealing with him. Come round at eleven to-morrow."

Captain Ridley demurred, but was finally persuaded. They had a cocktail together downstairs, and Mr. Prince saw his friend walk out into the Strand.

Ten minutes later he ran across Mr. Esmonde who, it seemed, was lunching that day at the Savoy, and he had hardly said good-bye before the Duke of Kirkaldy's huge form appeared in the lounge.

"'Well now," cried the big man, "here I am, and in the devil's own temper. Confound everybody. You'll have to cheer me up. I'm liverish, that's what I am."

Mr. Prince smiled. "But suppose I only succeed in making you angrier?" he asked.

"Eh, what's that? You make me angry? You couldn't make me angry. The only people who can make me angry are trustees and lawyers and fellows who talk business. I'm not going to talk business with you, my lad, am I? Of course I'm not. Very well, then, you can't make me angry. But you can cheer me up, and that's what you're going to do. You've got to make me laugh." The Duke was pulling his beard. "I've done enough business to last me a lifetime. Lord, yes. Now we're going to be merry and bright. As we were that evening at the Wintons," he added. "Now let's see what they can give us to eat."

They had luncheon, and the Duke's ill-temper speedily left him. Mr. Prince entertained him with a number of good stories which he had heard in the *King Henry*. Then he spoke of that white yacht which he had last seen sailing serenely out of Bournsea harbour.

The Duke became enthusiastic. "You'll have to come for a cruise," said he.

"Nothing I'd like better," Mr. Prince told him, and spoke the simple truth.

"Then come any time you like. Come now. I expect I shall be off to-morrow or the day after. There's nobody on board. I've got a man joining me farther north——"

"It's awfully kind of you, but—what d'you think of Bournsea?" he added abruptly.

The Duke stared. "Beastliest harbour in England," he declared.

"And the town itself?"

"The town? Ordinary sort of place, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. Do you know Sandmouth?"

"Seen it from the sea. No harbour there, is there?"

"Oh no. It's the tiniest place. I used to live there."

The Duke seemed surprised. "I thought your place was inland."

Mr. Prince—with some little effort—was smiling. "No," said he. "We had a house on the hill behind Sandmouth, but had to leave it during the war. Too expensive. So we went to Bournsea, into a much smaller house. Not even on the front. But when you haven't got any money, you can't help that sort of thing, can you?"

A puzzled frown was showing itself on the Duke's ruddy face. "But what the deuce d'you want with a house in Bournsea?" he demanded.

"You must live somewhere," observed Mr. Prince, watching his host very closely.

"Well, but——"

"And we've got a lodger, you know. Not the ordinary sort of lodger, I admit, but—it's rather rotten to be obliged to take a lodger, isn't it?"

The Duke was staring. "Hanged if I know what you're talking about."

"Well," said Mr. Prince, "I was talking about myself. You see, I'm not Oxney, though I'm supposed to be his double. I'm Oliver Prince."

The Duke's mouth opened wide, and remained open

for several moments. "Not Oxney?" he spluttered. "But—bless my stars! Not Ox—— Then who, I should like to know, who the devil *are* you?"

"I've just told you," replied Mr. Prince with his most engaging smile. "May I go on eating your lunch?"

The Duke continued to stare, and then portentously frowned. He looked very fierce and suspicious. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. And he was trying to remember something. Wasn't it something to do with a gold brick or a Spanish castle? Confidence men who twisted you, somehow, round their little fingers. Sharps. Yes, that was the word. Or crooks. But crooks were generally of American birth, weren't they? Then this boy——

The ducal frown became more pronounced, and the red beard seemed to become bellicose. In another moment, however, all was well. A deep murmur started somewhere behind that beard; it became louder; the Duke's mouth opened again; his blue eyes nearly closed. And then the neighbouring tables began to smile because the Duke of Kirkaldy had pushed back his chair, and thrown up his great head, and was roaring with laughter.

"My hat," said he, "what a joke!"

Mr. Prince did not attempt to hide his relief. "Isn't it?" he agreed, and proceeded to give a rough account of himself and his adventure with the real Lord Oxney. He did not go into detail, and he did not enlarge upon his own devilish cunning in the matter of Jacobs. But he did describe his motor-

drive to Oxney Towers in the middle of the night and the meeting with his double in that astonishing dressing-gown.

"It's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of," declared the Duke. "Why, you might easily—— I—er—I'd have sworn you were Oxney."

"And you don't mind giving me lunch?"

"Mind?" roared the big man. "Why should I mind?"

"Well, I suppose I ought to have told you of your mistake at once."

The Duke stared, and then laughed again. "Course you ought," he cried, "but I'm damned glad you didn't. Wouldn't have missed this for worlds."

"And would you still like me to come on the yacht?"

"Bless my soul, yes. I like you. You'd better tell my skipper some of those stories of yours. Not Oxney, you know! Lord!" He burst into laughter again, and the whole room watched.

"It's rather an adventure, isn't it? I like adventures, you know. That's why I like coming to big London hotels. And that reminds me. After we met yesterday, I had another interesting experience. I met a man, an ex-officer, who had been a prisoner in Turkey. He'd gone through the most awful time, though he was luckier than some of our fellows, because he didn't come home empty-handed. He was able to help some Turkish big-wig, and the Turk, he told me, gave him a most valuable present. Jolly little thing too. He showed it me. Sort of drinking-

cup, solid gold, and supposed to be three hundred years old."

The Duke seemed suddenly keen. "Gold drinking-cup, eh? And Turkish? H'm. Sounds interesting. I believe they used to make some very fine stuff. Fancy I've got one or two small pieces myself. Or are they Persian? I don't really know very much about these things, though my father used to coach me. The old boy, you know, was supposed to be the biggest expert in the world."

"I wish I had his knowledge. But you don't learn much about such things if you've been in the Navy. They seem to fetch the most enormous prices."

"It's the dealers," growled the Duke. "Never could stand the fellows myself."

"No, that's what my man said. He rather thought of selling his cup, by the way. Demobilized and out of a job, you know."

"Poor devil!"

"Yes. But of course he wouldn't have anything to do with the dealers. I don't blame him. Oh, and it was rather a coincidence, because when he showed me the cup, he mentioned your name as a collector."

"Well, there are a lot of things up in Fifeshire, where I live."

"In fact he suggested you as a possible buyer."

The Duke's manner underwent a quick change. "I a buyer?" he shouted. "Why, my dear boy, that's what I'm in London for. I don't want to buy. I want to *sell.*"

"Sell?" repeated Mr. Prince, looking puzzled.

"Bless my soul, yes. I'm as poor as a church mouse. Got three or four places to keep up and no money to do it. Expect the yacht 'll have to go next if something doesn't happen very soon. That's the trouble, don't you see. These gold things of mine—well, they won't let me pawn them or sell in the market. Trustees are such fools. They want me to wait. And—oh, it's a lot of bunkum, but the long and the short of it is that I can't sell my own things without the devil's own fuss. Buy?" He laughed again. "That's good."

Mr. Prince hurriedly changed the conversation by mentioning the fact that in addition to Captain Ridley, he had made the acquaintance of the Welkenbergs of Chicago. "I'm dining with them to-night," said he.

"Rolling, I suppose?"

Mr. Prince nodded. "You ought to meet them."

"I? Good Lord, I don't want to meet them. They'd be much too rich for a fellow like me."

"Oh, they're rather amusing," Mr. Prince told him, "and I don't mind meeting very rich people now and then."

That afternoon he went with the Duke to the Zoo, and nothing further was said of the gold cup. Mr. Prince, however, remained busy with his own plans, even while he was listening to the Duke's account of such wild beasts as he had shot years ago in the African jungle. He was pleased to observe, too, that Oxney had apparently been altogether forgotten. The Duke was accepting him as an old friend, and

that invitation to go on the yacht still held. Indeed, addresses had been carefully exchanged, and there had been much talk of a highly technical nature of navigation and the like. The Duke, it seemed, had been a Commander in the R.N.V.R. during the war, and knew all about the *King Henry*. He knew the Admiral and he knew Lord Bellchester, who was Lavery Doune's father. In fact they got on very well together, and when the time came for Mr. Prince to dress for dinner, he was very pleased with himself.

Financially speaking, however, there was still much to be done. It was one thing to pal up with the Duke, but it might be quite another to get on the same intimate terms with Mr. Cornelius Welkenberg.

As it turned out that dinner was the greatest possible success.

And as Mr. Prince got into bed, he realized that his good luck was holding.

Incidentally the drinking-cup was no longer in his possession.

CHAPTER X

Captain Ridley did not enjoy himself very much the next morning.

He arrived at the Savoy Hotel well in advance of his time, and was shown up to Mr. Prince's room. He found that young man just dressed and obviously on the best of good terms with himself.

"Well, old man, any luck?" he began eagerly

"The best of good luck," said Mr. Prince smiling. "You've sold it!"

Mr. Prince had taken a small leather case from the dressing-table. "Here's the money," said he. "Ten jolly fivers all nice and crisp.

He extracted the notes, and held them out.

For a moment Captain Ridley looked puzzled. Then his brow cleared. "The rest in a cheque, I suppose?"

It was now Mr. Prince's turn to look perplexed. "There's £50 there," he said, "but that's all. That's your commission. you know."

A queer hard expression came into Captain Ridley's face. He stood there, and for a moment or two said nothing. He was staring into the boy's eyes.

"What's the game?" he demanded at last in tones which were not at all pleasant.

Mr. Prince did not seem in the least perturbed.

"Oh, you see, it was I who got rid of the cup, and so naturally I keep the £450 and you take the commission." He was still holding out the notes.

The elder man forced his lips to a smile. "I'm afraid I don't see the joke," said he.

Mr. Prince's eyebrows were raised. "But it isn't a joke."

"Then I think you'd better hand over the rest of the money at once, if you want to avoid trouble."

"Avoid trouble?" repeated the boy. "But I thought it was you who were trying to avoid trouble."

"Look here, I don't know what you think you're——"

Mr. Prince was waving the notes. "You know," he interrupted, "I must say I think you're behaving very stupidly. You don't seem to realize there's £50 in my hands, and I'm offering it to you. It's a lot of money. Fifty whole pounds. You can do quite a lot with £50."

The Captain was obviously trying to keep his temper. "When I gave you my cup," he was beginning, but the boy stopped him.

"Ah, but you see, that's just the point. The cup doesn't belong to you. It never did, you know. You ought to have told me the truth. I've had to work fearfully hard to get rid of it. You stole it in Constantinople, and if I were you I wouldn't remain in London much longer. I really wouldn't. They might find you out. The police, I mean. The Foreign Office is furious with you. I happened to meet a man who knows all about it. The honour of the British Army

and all that, you know. Stealing and courts martial and things. Even warrants. If you take my advice——"

A dark flush had appeared on the other's face. He looked almost murderous. Mr. Prince thought for a moment that there might be a fight, in which case he would have an opportunity of trying that sub-lieutenant's dodge into the secret of which he had been let while the *King Henry* had been cruising in South African waters.

"You confounded little blackmailer, d'you think I'll——"

"Blackmailer!" Mr. Prince looked shocked. "How can I be a blackmailer? I'm not threatening you. I'm *giving* you money."

"You know very well what I mean, and if you think——"

"Oh, but, you see, I'm in no danger at all. I've done nothing wrong. I've only been—well, what you might call cunning. Devilish cunning, I suppose some people would say, but I can't get into trouble. They can never accuse me of stealing the cup, because I never did get to Constantinople. They *said* we were to go there, but then you know how plans get altered at the last moment. I think I told you that we went to Cape Town instead. Not that I'm altogether sorry——"

"Are you going to hand over the money?"

"Why, of course I am," replied Mr. Prince smiling. "Here it is. There's no reason to be angry. Here's £50, and I keep on telling you——"

"If you don't hand over the rest——"

"Oh, but I can't afford to give you any more," interrupted Mr. Prince, speaking very quickly. "You see, when it's a question of business, one can't always do exactly what one wants."

"See here," said Captain Ridley in a queer kind of whisper, "I've had about enough of this fooling. You may think yourself devilish cunning, but two can play at that game. Either you give me the rest of my money, or——"

"A fight?" cried Mr. Prince hopefully. "A fight in the Savoy Hotel? How ripping! But oughtn't I to get in the reporters? But, seriously, I don't think we'd better have a fight. Something, I expect, would get smashed, and they'd kick up an awful fuss and make us pay damages. You'd better take the £50 and say nothing more. Then nobody need know anything, need they? Of course I shan't give you away to the police, and I don't suppose the Foreign Office will worry you very much, because I think I've made it all right for you with them. I said I thought you had probably gone back to Turkey. And we shall both of us have got something out of it, shan't we?" he added sweetly.

Captain Ridley's hands were clenched. There was no question about it; he was in a terrible rage. He wanted to smash the face of this innocent-looking youngster who had played him such a scoundrelly trick. And yet with a great effort he restrained himself. Perhaps there was something about Mr. Prince's athletic figure which made him pause; perhaps that

casual mention of a warrant stopped him. He stood still for a moment or two, shaking with anger. Then he rushed towards the boy, seized hold of the notes, thrust them hurriedly into his pocket, and walked to the door.

"If you think you can cheat me like this," he cried hoarsely, "you'll very soon find out your mistake. You can get fifteen years for this. I'm not going to let the matter rest here." He broke out into a torrent of abuse, and went.

Mr. Prince smiled quietly to himself. Quite a respectable display of language. Ashley would have enjoyed it. But it was really rather disappointing to think that he had seen the last of Captain John Ridley. That story of Dowlat Effendi and Damad Pasha had been quite a good effort. Perhaps its teller really would go back to Turkey. The £50 would certainly be sufficient to pay his fare. On the other hand the Turkish authorities might not be very pleased to see him.

Yes, quite a good story.

And it was being the jolliest possible adventure.

Four hundred and fifty pounds! Added to the money which had already been banked, it made up a quite respectable sum. The nucleus, in fact, of what ought to be a nice little fortune. Soon he would have to be thinking of investments. Money in a bank, even on deposit, was a bit of a waste. Well, he would have to look about him. Good advice would be wanted. Who——

Mr. Cornelius Welkbenberg might be of assistance.

Eight per cent at least.

And eight per cent on—what was it?—nearly six hundred pounds——

He looked at his watch.

Good. He was just in nice time. In another five minutes he was due to go out with the Duke of Kirkaldy.

CHAPTER XI

TELEGRAMS did not come very often to the little house in a side street in Bournsea. Even more rarely did they come for Mr. Waynflete. A very long one, however, arrived, addressed to John Waynflete Esquire, about a week after Mr. Prince had gone up for the second time to London.

The old gentleman was alone in the house when it arrived, and he read it, standing at the open door, and stared blankly at the telegraph boy.

"Any answer, sir?"

Answer? Of course there was an answer. A very decided answer—in the negative. But he must have time to compose it. "Not at the moment, thank you," he managed to say, and went back to his own room.

It was really preposterous. And impertinent. The boy must have gone off his head. And the extravagance of it all! A telegram which filled two whole pages!

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he said aloud, and from the firmness of his tones you might have thought that he had already come to a fixed decision.

Go to London at once with a bundle of clothes and——

It was the grossest impertinence even to suggest such a thing. And yet——

Mr. Waynflete read through the telegram once again.

"Luck holding should like you here four hundred pounds to bank come at once Savoy Hotel dress clothes will meet train Waterloo six-five to-day most urgent please bring three pairs white flannel trousers bottom drawer also cap in hall white shoes my great coat also peaked cap stay one night am off to-morrow you must come will pay all exes bring sweater in cupboard tell mother things going well Oliver."

What on earth did it mean? And who in his senses supposed that he, John Waynflete, was going to rush up to London for a night merely to satisfy a boyish whim? He was far too old for that sort of thing.

"Of course I shan't go," he said, addressing his pipe. "I've never heard of such a thing in my life."

For all that, hardly ten minutes had passed before Mr. Waynflete was in a state of the greatest excitement. He was not going to London, of course, but what fun it would be if he were to decide to go! That young rascal was up to one of his tricks, and had made money again. Well, he was not going to allow the boy to make a fool of him again. . . . He hadn't had a holiday for years. Not a real holiday. And Mrs. Prince—— Well, she would have to be shown the telegram, and what would she say? She

might want him to go. But—go to London at a minute's notice? It was not to be thought of. And —white trousers?

His curiosity was increasing. *What* could the boy have been doing?

"It's ridiculous," said he, "I shan't think of going."

And then Mrs. Prince came in and was shown her son's message, and was immediately in a state of the most terrible anxiety. Her worry, however, concerned neither Oliver's well-being nor Mr. Waynflete's possible objections to the proposed journey to London. No, she was afraid lest one of the three pairs of white trousers might not be clean. As it happened, her fears were ill-founded, and by two o'clock Mr. Waynflete, to his own great amazement, found that all the necessary preparations had been made for his immediate departure. And as he was driven off to the station with a large bag which contained not only his own things but every one of the articles of clothing for which Oliver had asked, he was in a state of bewilderment, which lasted until the express rolled into Waterloo Station.

Here he was in London, after a ten years' absence, an unwilling visitor, and—why? To hand over a few clothes to a boy! It was certainly the most preposterous thing he had ever done in his life. Oliver would have to be spoken to very seriously. To expect an old man——

Mr. Prince, looking exceedingly smart, was on the platform to meet him. He smiled, and shook hands, and ordered a porter to put Mr. Waynflete's bag on

a taxi. He asked after his mother, hoped that all the things mentioned in his telegram had been found, and apologized for putting Mr. Waynflete to any trouble.

"But I thought you might enjoy coming up," said he, "and I've so much to do myself——"

"But, Oliver, I can't understand——"

Even now the old boy could not understand what had caused him to break the habit of years, and dash off to London with no fixed idea as to what he was going to do.

"You come along, Mr. Waynflete. I've got a very curious story to tell you. And you're going to meet the Esmondes—they've asked you to dinner to-night—and the Duke of Kirkaldy. And—oh, I tell you, you're going to enjoy yourself. And to-morrow I'll give you the money, and we shall have to discuss what's to be done with it, and I'm not at all sure that we oughtn't to move into a larger house. You see——"

For the next hour Mr. Waynflete's bewilderment grew. He was taken to the Savoy Hotel, and shown into a luxurious bedroom, and given a cigar, and forced into a chair, and for some considerable time was unable to learn either the real object of his visit or exactly what had been happening to the boy. Oliver, he thought, for all his cool acceptance of these unaccustomed splendours, did not explain himself too clearly.

"You're so vague, my dear boy," he complained, and forgot that he was not going to allow himself to

be fooled again. He had managed to piece together one or two incidents of what seemed to be a wholly impossible story, but that was all. "Your telegram——"

"But what don't you understand? We haven't much time, by the way, because we shall have to be dressing for dinner. We mustn't be late. You'll like the Esmondes," he added. "They're the jolliest people in London."

"Yes, yes, I shall be delighted to meet them, though I haven't worn my dress clothes for years. But before we go out, I want to understand what has happened. This cup you were talking about. Some man gave it you to sell, and offered you a commission, and you say Mr. Esmonde told you the true story of how it had come into the man's possession? But how——"

"Yes, Mr. Esmonde could hardly believe his ears when he heard me mention it. I really don't know why I did, but it's lucky I did, because, you see, the Foreign Office had been looking everywhere for it. They knew it had been stolen by a British officer at the time of the armistice. In fact there had been an awful row and inquiries and things, but they could never prove that this man Ridley was the thief, though he had been suspected. The G.O.C., Mr. Esmonde told me, had had to go to the Sultan about it—oh, and he'd sent cables, and the Foreign Office was in a fearful stew; prestige of the Army and all that sort of thing. And so, of course, I wasn't going to let the man get £450."

"Naturally not, but I still don't understand. You can't have . . . Oliver, you . . . *Oliver!*"

Mr. Prince looked up in surprise.

"You mean to tell me you sold this cup, knowing it to be stolen, and then kept nine-tenths of the proceeds by—by blackmailing the thief?"

Mr. Prince seemed a trifle uncomfortable. The old gentleman had risen up and was standing almost threateningly over him.

"I say, Mr. Waynflete, you do put things in such a horrid way. He called it blackmail himself, but surely he deserved all——"

"Oliver, I can't make you out. You don't seem to realize what you've done. It seems to me a good thing I've come up. To fetch you home," he added gloomily. "It doesn't look as if you can be trusted. Oh, I don't care a straw about this wretched fellow; it's you I'm concerned about. You knew the cup had been stolen."

"Well, but that was just the point, you see. It wasn't like stealing a thing from a London shop. This was a *Turkish* cup, and Ridley took it while the Turks were still legally our enemies. That was all bunkbum—what I said about a warrant, though of course he didn't know it. It was really only a diplomatic question, which was why I spoke to the Duke of Kirkaldy about it. He didn't want to buy, as I was telling you, but the Welkenbergs——"

"I don't care whom you sold it to," shouted Mr. Waynflete. "You've behaved disgracefully. I can't think——"

"But I gave that £50 to Ridley."

"That doesn't make things any better. You know perfectly well that, morally speaking, it wasn't yours to give."

"Oh, but it was. In fact Mr. Esmonde told me I should be justified in keeping the £50 myself."

The old gentleman had stepped back, and was looking at the boy in a puzzled way.

"Yes, you see, the Foreign Office people were so keen to get the cup back to Turkey that they'd decided to offer a reward. The £50 was that reward. Mr. Esmonde gave me the money in notes."

"But I thought—— You told me you'd sold the cup to this American or——"

"Oh *no,* Mr. Waynflete, I didn't. You see, you will keep on interrupting a fellow. I was trying to explain what had happened, when you started to talk about blackmail and things. Naturally I didn't try to sell the cup. I gave it to Mr. Esmonde. In fact he came here just before lunch to fetch it. And he brought me the money, too. They hadn't actually advertised the reward then, but the Treasury people sanctioned it, and so of course it came to me. Ten new fivers."

Mr. Waynflete had allowed his cigar to go out. He lit a match with a trembling hand, and sat down again in his chair. "Then perhaps you'll be good enough to explain how you got this four hundred pounds or whatever it is which your telegram mentioned."

"Oh, that," said Mr. Prince, "well, that's some-

thing different altogether. I hadn't come to that at all. You see, I thought you would want to hear about the cup first and Ridley's beautiful story. The other money——" He smiled to himself. "You didn't think it cheek of me, Mr. Waynflete, asking you to come up?"

Mr. Waynflete put a hand in front of his mouth. "Go on," he ordered. "I'm here now. I want to know——"

"But I don't want you to think—— You see, if it hadn't been for this other business, I should never have wired."

"Well, what is it? Tell me. You seem to take pleasure in trying to mystify me."

Mr. Prince grinned. "It is rather jolly," he admitted. "You get so fearfully——"

"I don't want any more of your jokes, Master Oliver." Mr. Waynflete had assumed an air of great sternness. Once again he had been fooled, and he was conscious of relief, but his dignity demanded that there should be no recurrence. "I want to know how you've come by this very large sum of money."

"Well, you see, I had to get it somehow, hadn't I? That's what I came up to London for. I could have kept that £50, but I remembered that if it hadn't been for Ridley, I shouldn't have heard anything about a reward. So I thought the poor devil might as well have it. But it was rather a nuisance giving up a whole fifty that you'd really earned, and I can tell you I was pretty sick about it all. If the cup had been mine, I might have got £450. That's

what I couldn't help thinking of. It's beastly, Mr. Waynflete, isn't it? not having things of your own to sell. And then, you know, I had the most wonderful Idea. I do get Ideas sometimes. I expect it's having been in the Navy. I kept on saying to myself that I'd get that £450 somehow, and all of a sudden I saw how to do it. I was with the Welkenbergs at the time. They're extraordinarily rich, you know. Much richer than any of our millionaires. Four or five hundred means nothing to them. Well, the Idea was this. The Welkenbergs, I knew, wanted to meet the Duke of Kirkaldy. They wanted most frightfully to meet him. And I thought, well, why shouldn't they, and—er, pay me for the introduction. Mrs. Welkenberg had actually asked me to introduce her. I remembered seeing in the papers advertisements of people who were prepared to introduce people into society for a fee."

Mr. Waynflete was chuckling. "You young rogue!"

"Yes, well, you have to make money these days in all sorts of ways. And I told them what was perfectly true. I said I didn't think the Duke wanted to meet anybody because he was only up in London for a few days on business, from his yacht. I said I expected to be going on the yacht myself in a little while. And then, well, you know, it was really rather odd, but we talked a whole lot, and they asked me all sorts of questions and found out I hadn't any money, and finally—you wouldn't believe it, Mr. Waynflete, but Mrs. Welkenberg asked me straight out

whether I thought I could arrange things so that she and her husband should spend a few days with the Duke on his yacht?"

"Lord help us!" said the old gentleman, "what next?"

"She did. And she didn't seem to think there was anything funny in it. I expect they often do that sort of thing in America. She told me, you see, that she wanted the news put in the Chicago papers—I mean, that the Welkenbergs had been on the Duke's yacht. Sort of social advertisement or something of that kind. They're funny, these rich Americans, but that was what they wanted, and Mr. Esmonde tells me that it often happens that an American millionarie will get into American society by getting to know dukes and people like that over here. Well, and Mr. Welkenberg"—Mr. Prince was smiling at the recollection—"he offered me anything I liked, if I could fix things up. Anything I liked, Mr. Waynflete!"

"Yes, well, and what then?"

"So of course I went straight off to the Duke, and got him into a good temper—you can get people into a good temper, you know, if you go about things in the right way—and began talking about Americans, and told him I'd been seeing a good deal of the Welkenbergs, and finally blurted out what they'd said. Yes, I did. I told the old boy they were quite jolly people who wanted to know him and I told him they'd promised me anything I asked for if I'd get him to take them a short cruise on his yacht. I said I should ask £450, and told him why—all about the cup, I

mean, and I also said they were just the sort of people he ought to be friendly with because they'd probably buy all his gold things at the most enormous prices, as they weren't dealers. And he roared with laughter, and agreed. He's a jolly good sort. Of course I don't expect he'd have done it for most people, but I think he likes me, and when a fellow likes you, he'll do a good deal. Well, so I introduced them, and we all had dinner together, and I got Mr. Welkenberg into a corner, and began talking, and I plucked up courage at last, and asked for £450. I said it was a very large sum for an introduction, but then I pointed out that the Duke wasn't accustomed to doing things of that kind as he was related to Royalty, and it was only because we were such good pals, and I'd been done out of a good deal of money—— Oh, I tell you, I talked to him like a father. And, you know, I think the Welkenbergs like me too. It stands to reason they wouldn't have given me all that money if they hadn't. Yes, he gave it me, Mr. Waynflete, there and then. Wrote out a cheque!"

"Well, my boy, if you'd told me a week ago that such things were possible——"

"Oh," interrupted the boy in his airiest manner, "if you've been in the Navy you can do a whole lot of interesting things on shore. And now, of course, you see why I wanted you here. I've got the cheque in my pocket, and we all go off to-morrow. But I must be decently dressed on board, and it didn't seem worth while buying a lot of new kit when I had it at home. So as I wanted you to meet Mr. Esmonde and

—er, Doris, the daughter, well, you see what I mean. Mother, I knew, wouldn't want to come up. And—hullo, it's time to dress. I'd better go. Aren't you glad you've come? You'll love the Esmondes. And one of these days, you know," he added thoughtfully, "I shouldn't be surprised if I got married."

"God bless my soul!" said the old gentleman.

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Waynflete's very brief visit to London—it lasted no more than eighteen hours—long remained in his memory. It became a sort of landmark. Henceforth he ceased to look upon Oliver as a clever attractive boy who periodically deserved a scolding. Very definitely his old friend's son was taking his place as Head of the Family: and a most unusual Head into the bargain.

There was something about him which demanded —respect.

At the same time a word of advice now and then might be helpful. Mr. Waynflete determined to offer it whenever a chance presented itself.

On his visit, however, he had little opportunity. He had, indeed, small time to think very clearly of anything at all. He was rushed hither and thither. He had hardly put on his dress clothes before he was being hurriedly presented to a Chicago millionaire who for some reason or other called him Professor. Then he was rushed to the rooms of a red-bearded man who turned out to be the Duke of Kirkaldy. He was given a cocktail, and felt agreeably abandoned. Then, when he was allowed to sit quietly with Oliver for a few moments, he could not help noticing that people were staring at the boy.

Well, Oliver, he realized, was really rather handsome. It was amusing to sit here and——

He was whirled away to Chelsea in a car, and for the first time for long years dined in state. And his amazement grew. Here, surely, was an Oliver about whom he knew nothing at all: no longer the youngster who loved practical jokes, but a young man of the world with excellent manners and a fund of small talk. It was impossible to doubt that he had been doing this sort of thing every night of his life. And yet in the little house in Bournsea——

Mr. Waynflete refused to think of the past: the future was so much more attractive. And in a very short while he found himself prepared to give Mrs. Prince a detailed description of a very pretty girl with whom Oliver seemed to be on extremely intimate terms. It was absurd, of course, but undeniably charming.

Oliver—married?

Well, some day. . . .

The champagne was entirely to his liking. The years rolled away, and allowed him temporarily to re-assume those social qualities which a former Lord Oxney had appreciated so much. He talked well, and Oliver, hiding his surprise—who could have expected the old boy to blossom out in this way?—was proud of the "lodger."

The evening in fact was a great success, and when the two young people went off into the billiard-room, Mr. Waynflete expressed his great satisfaction. He also sought Mr. Esmonde's opinion about the boy's

future. Oliver, he declared, was bound to get on, but—what did Mr. Esmonde think of his present irregular mode of earning a living? Surely this fortuitous acquisition of fees would not do.

Mr. Esmonde agreed.

"I must have a serious talk with the boy."

"I think it would be a very good thing," said Mr. Esmonde.

And so at midnight Mr. Waynflete endeavoured to draw a picture of the joys of a regular profession. It was all very well to pick up rewards in this haphazard way, but no one could hope——

Mr. Prince did not allow him to proceed very far. "Yes," said he, "but I've got an Idea about that, too. But it's got to—er, to—what's the word? the thing that wines and cigars have to do."

"Mature?" suggested the old gentleman.

Yes, that was it. The Idea would have to mature, and it was going to mature on board the Duke's yacht.

And for the next few days it may be said to have done so. Mr. Prince spent a happy week on board, and made friends with the Skipper, and had the satisfaction of observing that the Duke and his two guests from Chicago got on very well together.

Incidentally he posted off five letters, all very long, to Chelsea, and a short note to Mr. Waynflete.

The long letters, he learnt later, had given the greatest satisfaction.

The short note was rather puzzling to its recipient. It asked for precise information as to the best book for

a beginner on *English Portrait Painting*. A reply was to be sent to the Savoy Hotel. . . .

One warm evening, ten days later, Mr. Prince was strolling along Piccadilly. He wore an exceedingly smart dinner jacket and a new silk hat. It was nearly ten o'clock, and for the last half-hour he had been trying unsuccessfully to make up his mind to return to his hotel.

He had spent a fairly strenuous day. He had reached London the previous afternoon with the Welkenbergs, who had suddenly decided to rent a Sussex castle for the autumn and had motored away an hour after their arrival. He was delighted to find waiting for him not only a letter from Chelsea but also a volume which Mr. Waynflete had found in his small library and forwarded on as a gift. The Idea by this time had thoroughly matured, and Mr. Prince lost more than two hours of sleep reading the book. At an early hour this morning, moreover, he had begun a series of explorations. He had wandered forth to various picture galleries, and spoken to grave gentlemen whose duty it was to "keep" these pictures for the public's delectation, and paid a visit to the Casdagli Brothers, the well-known art-dealers in Bond Street. After luncheon he had been driven to Hertford House, and looked in at half a dozen shops where only the most expensive antiques were sold. And all the while he had been imbibing new knowledge.

He had hoped to dine in Chelsea, but most regrettably the Esmonds were engaged. And so he had

dined alone, and sauntered out, and watched the people about him, and thought a great deal about pictures—in particular about those portraits which fetched such very large prices when they came into the market.

Now it must be admitted that Mr. Prince was not especially thrilled by old portraits, but he had become aware that many other people were: so thrilled, indeed, that they were prepared to pay ridiculously large sums of money to obtain them. Mr. Welkenberg, for instance. . . . And the sale of a portrait of that kind inevitably carried with it a handsome commission.

Therein of course lay the new Idea.

People who sold these things on commission made unbelievably large fortunes. They were able to buy country houses and motor-cars. Sometimes they were even knighted, though why they should be knighted Mr. Prince did not know. But it really did seem as though selling pictures was about the easiest way to make money—if you knew the right people, and Mr. Prince saw no reason at all why he should not play a part in the business. Obviously there were difficulties—you could not expect to become what was called an expert in a day—but what he might lack in artistic knowledge was going to be balanced by that devilish cunning of his which these rich dealers most probably lacked.

This evening, however, he was being forced to confess that these difficuties might prove to be even greater than he had supposed. Mr. Welkenberg had not been too definite about the sort of picture he wanted, but he had said that in the event of an his-

torical portrait by a first-class painter coming up for sale, he would be prepared to offer a good price.

Therefore an historical portrait by a first-class painter would have to be found.

Well, there were hundreds of them about; but—in every case the dealers had already stepped into the business.

And where the dealers were concerned——

The Duke of Kirkaldy and Captain Ridley had been right. Dealers were a wholly unpleasant race of beings, with whom it was impossible to become friends. They were charming so long as they believed you to be a rich buyer, but extraordinarily beastly if they discovered your real intentions.

Where, then, was an historical portrait of which the dealers knew nothing at all, to be found?

Not in Piccadilly.

Mr. Prince lit a cigarette. Neither in Piccadilly nor anywhere else was he likely to find a portrait at this time of night. Therefore he would go straight home to the Savoy Hotel.

He turned, and his attention was immediately directed to a young man attired like himself, whose behaviour was sufficiently odd. For after apparently making an earnest attempt to walk through a plate-glass window at the end of St. James's Arcade, the young man seemed eager to swim on the pavement. Then, finding this method of propulsion unsatisfactory, he began to climb the iron gates.

Mr. Prince did not stop to think. He entirely forgot that he had been looking for an historical por-

trait. Here was something much more exciting. He dashed across the road, caught hold of the young man's coat, and dragged him away into a neighbouring doorway.

"You ass," said he struggling, "the police'll be certain to—— Oh, my aunt, if it isn't Lavinia!"

He chuckled. Here, very drunk, and inclined to be very disorderly, was the Honourable Lavery Doune, whose ladylike manners and general incompetence in the *King Henry* had earned him his nickname—a poor weakling who ought never to have gone into the Navy.

The young man was staring foolishly at his captor.

"Drunk," he mumbled, "but it's las' time, abs'lutely las'. 'Volver in pocket." Then he smiled. " 'Member you. Snottie. Ashley. No, not Ashley. Prince. Tha' 's your name. Prince. Good ol' Prince. Goo' pal." He began to weep.

Mr. Prince was a man of action. He took hold of the young man, and without another word unceremoniously propelled him up a side street. This was not the first occasion on which he had come to the Honourable Lavery's assistance. On the high seas it had needed all his cunning to prevent the chap from receiving very serious punishment. Now, it seemed, he was being called on to play the same part again. He was not quite sure that he had ever liked Lavinia very much, but the fellow certainly couldn't be left to look after himself in this state, and——

A taxicab passed. With a nod Mr. Prince engaged it.

"Where do you live?" he demanded, as he half-pushed, half-lifted the wretched youth into the cab.

A reply was mechanically given, and they drove off to Mount Street.

"A sort of adventure," thought Mr. Prince, as the cab turned into Berkeley Street. He had just succeeded in extracting a revolver from Mr. Doune's pocket.

And he did not know that once again the Fates had been kind.

CHAPTER XIII

The Honourable Lavery Doune's flat was a truly magnificent place. It contained nine or ten rooms. The drawing-room was large and suggested an old country house rather than a flat in Mayfair. The walls were panelled, and the furniture was square and solid. Also there were pictures. In particular there was one over the mantlepiece—the portrait of a mournful youth in blue satin—which instantly reminded Mr. Prince of an illustration in Mr. Waynflete's book. The bedrooms, too, were luxurious. One was oak-panelled and its bed a four-poster, and another had an ideal bathroom in marble attached to it.

And all this magnificence belonged to a fellow who had been carrying a loaded revolver in his pocket!

Some girl or other, Mr. Prince supposed, was responsible, and he wondered who the youth in blue satin might have been.

With the help of a taciturn valet he succeeded in undressing the Honourable Lavery, who after being violently ill became suddenly sober, and burst into tears again.

"Prince, will you see if you can help me? I know I'm a fool, but—it seems like Providence meeting you to-night. I don't know——"

"Help you? I don't expect I can help you."

"Well, but, Prince, I've no one to go to."

Mr. Prince found the fellow's sobs very upsetting. "I'll help if I can," he promised.

"Thanks, old chap, you're a real friend. You know, I meant—I meant to end everything," he confided, as he lay in his bed, an ashamed untidy creature. "I don't know what'd have happened, if you hadn't turned up. And—I say!—it's the second time you've come to the rescue!" He looked more sheepish than ever.

Mr. Prince's face assumed a stern look suited to a very senior naval officer called on to administer martial law. "You'd better tell me the whole story," he said.

Whereupon Mr. Doune made an attempt to describe his numerous misfortunes. They were in no wise unusual. She was called Phyllis, and was on the stage. She was exquisitely beautiful, and a really good actress—if only they'd give her a decent chance, though even in the chorus—— Everybody had to begin in the chorus, hadn't they? And her people were real decent sorts. Respectable and all that. She'd had a good education. High school. And her hair: it was fair, the most wonderful hair——

With a memory of another young lady's hair in his mind Mr. Prince cut short the description of Phyllis's multiple charms. "What happened?" he demanded.

Well, it seemed that Miss Phyllis was very extravagant, and on occasions her temper was awful.

"Terrific," said Mr. Doune, and looked wearily up at his visitor. "You wouldn't believe what she's like when—well, I mean, when things don't go exactly as she likes. I can't understand a girl—— Of course these managers are enough to make anybody angry, but still—— And then, don't you see, there's this business at Mason's Club. You can't expect——"

"Mason's Club?"

Mason's Club, it appeared, was an extremely exclusive Club in St. James's Place, where play was high. Mr. Doune was a member. Mr. Doune had always been fond of cards, and usually enjoyed the best of luck. Anybody would tell Prince that he usually held the most wonderful cards. But of late—— He wasn't of course bewailing his luck: naturally you expected to have runs of bad luck now and then. But last week his own luck had been so infernally, so unbelievably, so impossibly bad that he had almost come to the conclusion that somebody had —well, Mr. Prince would know what he meant. Not playing fair. In fact, cheating.

Cheating at Mason's of all places!

It wasn't a nice sort of thing to have to say, but —really, what could you think when a man like Henry Ryde won seventy——

But Mr. Doune had done with Mason's Club. Sent in his resignation. Mason's Club was going to the dogs.

"Don't you ever go near it," advised the Honourable Lavery. "I'm telling you."

"Yes, well, you lost money. And what then?"

"You see, my dear fellow, it wouldn't have mattered so much, if I hadn't just had the most frightful week at Newmarket."

There came a pause.

So it seemed that even the people whom Mr. Prince had most envied on account of their wealth, could have finanical troubles much worse than his own. It was rather queer. He looked at the miserable figure in bed, and thought of that day in the *King Henry* when another tale of woe had been poured into his ears. "Well?" said he.

Well, as the only son of a rich peer well known to all the world as a great sportsman—here Mr. Prince nodded: he knew that Lord Bellchester had twice won the Derby—Mr. Doune, in his own view at any rate, might have expected an allowance more than sufficient for his needs. But in point of fact he had had next to nothing. And so of course when Newmarket had failed him, and Sir Henry Ryde had so unmercifully rooked him, money had had to be raised, first from an aunt and then from the Jews. He admitted that his father had twice paid his debts —on the second occasion, however, only after the most solemn promise on his part never to gamble again or raise one penny piece from the Jews. You would have thought that a man like his guv'nor would have helped him with his bets; but no, the old boy had got it into his head that his son knew nothing about horseflesh and never would. Mr. Doune had meant to keep his word—absolutely—but just at that moment Phyllis had been extraordinarily difficult, and

—well, he had had to have more money, and so tried his luck once again at Mason's, and lost—rather heavily, as it happened, and Jacobs was threatening him, and to crown all, Phyllis had practically chucked him for some Major or other who had thousands a year of his own and a face like a diseased pumpkin.

"Jacobs!" repeated Mr. Prince, and wondered where Lady Oxney and Mr. Elton might be at this moment.

Mr. Doune's face was showing his disgust. It was difficult, he continued, to make clear his exact position, but he had to find £400 by the following Monday, and was so desperate that he had even thought of forging his father's name or cheating at cards. "So you can guess," he finished, "what sort of a time I've been having. Jacobs swears he'll tell my father if I don't pay by Monday and that means—no more allowance. In fact the old boy told me last time I could go to the devil if it happened again. Oh, you know what it is. I *must* have the money or . . . And I've no one to go to. My aunt—she's the Duchess of Belton and as rich as they make 'em—doesn't come back to England until the end of next week. I don't know where she is. It's the most absolute mess. I want——"

He buried his face in his hands.

Mr. Prince was staring at a chair. He was not altogether surprised, and yet how odd it was to find a fellow surrounded by all this luxury, old portraits and all the rest of it, the next Lord Bellchester, pressed for money!

"Look here," he began, "if your aunt is coming home next week——"

"But, Jacobs, don't you see, won't wait a day longer. He's the very devil when he's got you in his clutches."

Mr. Prince nodded. He thought that he understood Mr. Jacobs well enough. There followed a little pause. It hardly seemed possible that he would be able to afford Lavinia any assistance, and yet already at the back of his mind a vague kind of Idea was taking root. Four hundred pounds was a large sum of money. And even if it could be procured, was —well, was Lavinia to be trusted to pay off his debts with it? He could not forget what had happened in the *King Henry*. Ashley had called him a fool. Ashley had never liked Lavinia at all.

"But supposing," he said suddenly, "you had the £400, how do you know your aunt would pay up when she returns?"

An eager look came into the Honourable Lavery's eyes.

"Oh, she's fond of me," he said, "and I think I could explain things to her. She's a bit of a sport. Goes exploring. Africa and all that. And she thinks my guv'nor ought to give me more than he does. She told me so. Oh yes, my aunt's all right. She gave me a hundred on my last birthday. Why—d'you think—Prince, d'you think you could raise me this £400 somehow?"

There came another pause, much longer than the last. Mr. Prince lit a cigarette.

"I *could* get it," he said at last, "if there was any real security; but, you see, your aunt isn't here, and she might not pay up——"

"Oh, but I tell you she'd do anything I asked her."

Mr. Prince was shaking his head. "It's no good," said he, "unless you've got something as security."

"But what have I got?"

Mr. Prince was watching a smoke-ring. "This flat belong to your father?" he asked casually.

Mr. Doune looked sharply at him. "More or less," he admitted. "Why?"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter then."

"But I say, you know, some of the things are mine. I could——" He was sitting up in his bed now. "What about the Romney? Over the mantelpiece in the other room. It's worth I don't know what. Wouldn't that do for security?"

"If it were yours."

The Honourable Lavery seemed to be finding it hot. He brushed his hair back from his forehead. "But it is mine, you see. That's—that's why it's here and not in the country. It belonged to my mother, and it's—don't you see, it's a portrait of her great-grandfather, Sir Robert Anselm. I couldn't sell it, of course, but wouldn't it do for security?"

Mr. Prince stared. "If it's yours, why can't you sell it?"

"Oh, because—well, there'd be an unholy row. Sort of heirloom and all that."

"I see." Mr. Prince was thinking hard. The

Idea was becoming slightly more concrete. It was a very bold Idea, and if it were to come to anything, the most extreme cunning would be necessary. And yet—why not? Wasn't the name of Sir Robert Anselm somehow familiar to him? Surely! And why was he thinking of his grandfather? But of course! The history books mentioned this man. Sir Robert Anselm had been somebody of importance. A Prime Minister or something of that kind. And Romney? Nobody could deny that Romney was a first-class painter. People paid colossal prices for his work. Then this portrait might——

"I say, Prince, let's go into the other room and have a look at it. Come along. I feel no end better."

They went into the drawing-room, and Mr. Prince gazed up at the portrait. "A pity," he remarked, "it isn't a woman. Romney's women fetch so much more than his men."

Mr. Doune, wrapping his dressing-gown closely about him, looked into the other's face. "You know something about pictures, then?"

"Not very much, but enough to know that."

"But in any case it would be worth more than four hundred pounds?"

"Yes, if it's the original."

"Shows you don't know much if you think it's a copy, old man."

"I don't think anything of the kind. I was only saying——"

"Well, you can take my word——" He stopped,

looked up at the portrait, and then at Mr. Prince. "If I could get a copy made," he said slowly, "I wouldn't mind selling the original."

"But if your aunt stumps up?"

"I mean, if she didn't."

Mr. Prince looked at him coolly. "If you let me have that portrait as security," he said, "I'll lend you £400 to-morrow myself. I've been having a bit of luck lately."

(Had he really said it? Had he, Oliver Prince, actually offered to hand over £400 to Lavinia on the security of that portrait? Yes, he had. It was part of the Idea that he should. A bit of big business such as magnates were accustomed to transact. Here he was—in the midst of a transaction of the greatest importance. A Romney of which the dealers probably knew nothing at all. And that Chicago millionaire——)

Mr. Doune was trying to hide his excitement. "Look here," he cried, "you're a brick, and if my aunt—— I say, if you could get a copy made, and were to sell the original privately for a thousand—I know it's worth more than that—I'd pay you back £500. I don't care a fig for the thing myself, but you know what one's people feel. A copy'd please 'em just as much. But it 'd have to be done privately, or the family would kick up the devil's own row. I say, Prince, d'you think you could do this?"

Mr. Prince did not reply for quite a long time. "I think I might," he said at last, "but of course we'd have to do the whole thing in a business-like way. If

I could sell it, well and good, but suppose it wasn't sold, it would have to be loaned to me until you repaid me the £400."

"Why, of course, old man." Mr. Doune spoke doubtfully.

"And I'd have to have some sort of paper authorizing me to sell, or else people might wonder how I came to have it."

Mr. Doune's eyes narrowed. "Ye-es."

"And you wouldn't mind my showing the picture to an expert before I give you the money?"

"I say, hang it all, can't you take my word?"

"That's nothing to do with it. In matters of business you've got to do these things, and four hundred's a lot of money to me. Of course if you don't want me to help——"

"No, no. It's all right. I see what you mean."

"Then I'll come round to-morrow." Mr. Prince was fastening his coat. "And if I were you, Doune," he added, "I shouldn't carry a revolver about. I don't suppose you've got a licence, and the police make an awful fuss. I'll keep yours, I think, for the present, as part of the security."

"Righto, don't you worry about me. Now that I shall be able to pay old Jacobs, I don't want to do myself in. And as for Phyllis," he added savagely, "I'm through with her."

Mr. Prince smiled, and said good night.

Altogether a strenuous day.

CHAPTER XIV

If you want to make money, you must work hard. All the educational manuals agree on that point. The next morning Mr. Prince worked very hard indeed. In the modern way he transacted most of his business at the telephone. He spoke first of all to his friends the Esmondes. Then he was switched on to the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company. After that a letter was written and sent off to Mr. Carstairs at Bournsea, informing the bank-manager what might be happening to Mr. Prince's account in the near future. A trunk call was put through to a certain castle in Sussex, and while he was waiting, Mr. Prince seized the opportunity of persuading Messrs. Casdagli Brothers to send one of their experts to see him. The trunk call followed, and there was a smile on Mr. Prince's face as he replaced the receiver.

After which he walked round to Mount Street.

It was then that things began to happen, and they continued to happen by fits and starts for the next six days. . . .

At a few minutes before one o'clock that morning, a sleek gentleman with a bald head and a large diamond in his tie-pin, arrived at the Savoy Hotel. He announced himself as Mr. Reuben Casdagli, and was immediately shown up into a private room.

There he found Mr. Prince and—a portrait of a young man in blue satin.

The two gentlemen shook hands. Mr. Prince offered his cigarette-case.

"It's good of you to come so quickly," he said, "but my time, you see, is so short."

Mr. Casdagli was making little purring noises in his throat. He had hardly glanced at Mr. Prince. He had placed two pairs of pince-nez on his rather large nose, and his attention was being given to the picture which had been placed on an easel. He examined it from all sorts of positions. At one moment Mr. Prince was afraid lest he was about to lick off some of the paint, at another it seemed likely that he would hit the back of his head against the door. He tapped and knocked and blew at the frame, and then he produced a magnifying-glass from his pocket. And all the time he continued to purr.

"An early work," he announced at last. "I haven't seen it before, and it hasn't been in the market. If I were to make a guess, it would be that it is either Lord Waldo or Sir Robert Anselm as a young man."

"It is Sir Robert," said Mr. Prince, secretly marvelling.

The purring became louder. "And it is to go to America?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Seems a pity," commented Mr. Casdagli. "A very great pity. I'd give you—I'd give you, let me see"—he gave a sharp glance at Mr. Prince—£1200."

Mr. Prince shook his head, and smiled. "Quite

out of the question, Mr. Casdagli. If you remember, I told you on the telephone, there was some talk of a copy being made before the picture went out of the country, and also we thought that it ought——"

"Quite. Quite." Mr. Casdagli had resumed his examination of the portrait. "I quite understand. We shall do exactly what you require. The time is short, very short indeed, but I think we can manage. I have a very good man who will do—— Yes, yes, but it's a great pity. Would—£1500 tempt you?" he added, and jerked up his head like a bird.

Mr. Prince seemed impressed. He did not reply for a moment or two.

"I must think it over," he said. "Meanwhile——"

"I'll send for it, Mr. Prince, after lunch. You need have no fear. We undertake the insurance while it is with us."

He removed his glasses, observed that the day was hot, wiped his brow, shook hands, and departed.

Mr. Prince wrote out a cheque for £400, and sent for a messenger boy.

He lunched alone in an old-fashioned chop-house, and then walked to Shepherd's Market. There, in a garage, he renewed acquaintance with Major Gilbert Farnham. The Major seemed delighted to see him.

"And you've got another of your little stunts on?"

Mr. Prince admitted that another little stunt had begun. He fancied he might require a powerful car two or three times this week. And a chauffeur who knew Sussex.

The Major had just the man.

And the terms?

The Major suggested their going into his office—a tiny box of a place—and there went into the matter in detail. Mr. Prince listened attentively. His expenses, he saw, would not be small, but in big business expenses were the last thing to be considered. He would probably be careering all over the place for the best part of a week, and—— The big Daimler, by all means. To-morrow morning at the Savoy Hotel. Ten o'clock.

He said good-bye, and walked away in the direction of Victoria. Outside the station he hailed a cab, and was driven to Chelsea.

And there, at any rate, the adventure showed every sign of being a success.

Miss Esmonde was alone.

"Auntie's gone out," Miss Esmonde informed him, and hoped that he would not mind.

Mr. Prince looked round to make sure that the door was well and truly closed, and then kissed her five or six times. "I say, Doris, how ripping! I haven't seen you for weeks. Let's sit on the sofa."

She was pretending to frown. "For you to maul me about?"

"Maul? I like that. I say, you do kiss splendidly. Let's kiss twenty times as slowly as we can."

"Don't be silly. They'll be bringing in tea in a minute."

"We'd hear them coming."

"But I want to hear all about the yacht."

"Yes, but let's kiss first. I've got heaps of things

to tell you, and I want you to come out to-morrow for a run in the car."

"The car? What car? You haven't got a car, Oliver?"

"I've got one for a week," Mr. Prince told her importantly, "and we're going to have lunch in Brighton."

"But I can't come alone with you!"

"Why not?"

"Well, father'd object."

"He wouldn't. I think he likes me, you know," he added, and for a while no further speech seemed to be called for.

Over tea, however, Mr. Prince discussed some of his plans. He was purposely rather vague, and he swore her to secrecy every few minutes. "I can't tell you *all*," said he, "but if the affair does come off, I'll—I'll give you a new dress," he finished.

"You give me a new dress? You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, you can't."

"Then I'll give you something else."

"But I can't understand, Oliver. Why do you want to go to Brighton?"

"They give you such good meals there."

"Don't be so silly. Tell me."

Mr. Prince assumed a mysterious air. "Will you come?" he asked.

"Ye-es, if father doesn't mind."

"Oh, I'll tackle him. Splendid! We'll have the greatest fun. You and I, Doris, in a huge car!"

"But can you afford it?"

Mr. Prince was at some pains to explain that where big business was concerned expenses never mattered very much. "We're going to have the time of our lives," said he, "and that's all about it."

And have the time of their lives they most certainly did. Mr. Esmonde gave his permission, and saw his daughter depart in a huge Daimler a little after ten the next morning. The Daimler raced down into Sussex, and stopped at a village, and found its way into a glorious park, and set down Mr. Prince in front of an old castle. For a while Miss Esmonde was left alone in the car, agreeably intrigued, and not even when they reached Brighton and were eating the nicest possible food would he tell her the real object of his visit.

"Just business," said he.

Afterwards they danced in the resplendent hotel, and she found that he danced very well, and he felt impelled to whisper his determination—rather a rash one—never to dance with anybody else, and on the homeward run they sat very close together, and agreed that for pals like themselves to have quarrels or even mere tiffs was the height of absurdity.

And yet six days later, when Mr. Prince happened to be lunching in Chelsea, Miss Doris was exceedingly haughty and cold. Even her aunt noticed it, and tried not to smile. Mr. Prince seemed very unhappy.

There was a reason, of course. Miss Esmonde considered that it was a very good reason. Mystery

was all very well, but when it meant that you were not allowed to be told *anything,* and people could never say whether they would be able to come round to your house until the last minute, it was not to be borne. Moreover, was joy-riding every day in the country in a large Daimler the right way to make money? And Oliver had promised that she should share all his secrets.

They played billards as usual, but the game did not open very well, and before many strokes had been played, he had propped up his cue against the table, and was facing her.

"I say, Doris, what's up?"

"Up? Nothing's up."

"You're—so—so beastly."

"Oh, I'm beastly, am I?"

"Hang it, you know what I mean. You're quite different. And at lunch you were queer. You won't even smile."

"I can't always be smiling."

He looked at her for a moment in silence. "Doris, do tell me."

"There's nothing the matter. Why don't you go on playing? I came here to play billiards."

"I can't play when you're not a bit pally."

"Well, you're not pally either."

"I?" said Mr. Prince, genuinely surprised.

"Yes, you. It's you who've been behaving in a beastly way. I never know what you've been doing, or when you're coming to see us. You just come and go as though the house was a hotel. And you're

always in that beastly old car, going to Sussex. I —I suppose she's pretty?"

Mr. Prince stared in astonishment, and then chuckled. "You old idiot," said he impolitely.

"Oh, I'm an idiot, am I? Well, then, you'd better go off to your American girl."

"But there isn't an American girl."

"Really?" The word was spoken with all the scorn at Miss Esmonde's disposal.

"You know there isn't. Would I have taken you to Brighton if—— I say, Doris, you don't want a—row?"

She was just about to assume her haughtiest air when she unwisely looked into his eyes. "I—you're horrid," she said.

"But I'm not horrid, you know. Only frightfully busy."

"So you say. You told me you'd tell me all your adventures."

"But this one isn't finished."

"You've been saying that for the last week." She was pouting. It was becoming very difficult indeed, she found, to continue being haughty and cold.

"Well, it's a long adventure, and you can't rush these things."

"You might have taken me in the car yesterday."

He looked at her reproachfully. "I didn't know how long I should be. As a matter of fact I didn't get home till eleven. But, Doris, I'll be able to tell you everything to-morrow, if the adventure has been a success."

"Promise?" said the girl after a pause.

He nodded, and looked very pleased. Then he kissed her—several times—and for some reason or other that particular game of billiards was never finished.

And the next day it really did seem as though the adventure was nearing its conclusion. At an early hour Mr. Prince drove round to Mount Street. He took with him a picture wrapped in brown paper. He found the Honourable Lavery Doune in bed, sipping his coffee and reading the morning paper.

"Hullo, Prince, got it at last?" He spoke sleepily.

Mr. Prince nodded.

"Well, thank God for that, I was getting nervous."

"Nervous? Why?"

"If the guv'nor were to come along and see that empty space over the mantelpiece, he'd want to know —— However, I must get up and have a look at it. Seen the paper?" he added.

"Yes."

"Seen where my aunt is, then ?"

"The Duchess? No."

"Morocco," said Mr. Doune with the utterest contempt, "and that probably means she won't be back till the spring. Can't understand what she can see in those dagoes out there. Well," he added, "it's a good thing I thought of selling. No news yet, I suppose?"

Mr. Prince looked at him. "Yes," he said quietly, "it's all settled."

The Honourable Lavery jumped up in the greatest

excitement. "Lord!" cried he, "why didn't you tell me? Man, don't you see what it means to me? How much did you get?" He was wide awake now.

"How much did I get?" repeated Mr. Prince. "Well, I'm not quite certain. I think——" He took a paper from his pocket and consulted it. "Taking off expenses and things of that sort," he continued, "I reckon I shall have got about £1430."

Mr. Doune had leapt from his bed and started to dance round the room. "I say, you know, it isn't half such a bad world after all. I had a letter from Phyllis last night."

"I thought she had chucked you."

"Oh no. It was only one of her usual scenes. That Major fellow is the most frightful bounder. No girl would want to be seen about with him. She's lunching with me to-day, as a matter of fact. I say, let's have a look at the copy. You told 'em I wanted the old frame?"

"Yes, I told them they were to return the old frame."

"Fourteen hundred!" cried Mr. Doune boisterously. "My stars, what a piece of luck! Come along. I feel like a bottle of fizz."

In the drawing-room Mr. Prince untied his parcel, and stepped back to look at the portrait. "Pretty good, eh? I went to the best people. They had to be frightfully quick. Generally it takes much longer—— Hullo, what's the matter?"

The Honourable Lavery had uttered a cry of disappointment.

"The blithering idiots!" he shouted. "Call that a

copy? Why, anyone could tell it hadn't been painted a week! Prince, can't you see? It's all shiny and new."

Mr. Prince was playing with his watch-chain. "You can't help that," he said. "It'll look old soon enough."

"Heavens, man, but it would never take in the guv'nor for a moment. Look at it! My hat, what the deuce——"

"Why not hang it in a dark corner for a while?"

There was no question that the portrait of Sir Robert Anselm looked exceedingly new. There was also no question that Mr. Doune was exceedingly worried.

"I wish I'd never seen the confounded thing."

"But why not do as I suggest? Why not put some other picture over the mantelpiece and——"

"Oh, come on then." Mr Doune was scowling. "Lend me a hand. We can take down that Cornish picture."

Five minutes later the portrait of Sir Robert Anselm was hanging in a corner, and a view of the Cornish coast on a rough day was to be seen over the mantelpiece. Mr. Doune, in his dressing-gown of scarlet with blue facings, was smoking a cigarette and attempting to hide his perturbation. Mr. Prince, also smoking, reclined in an easy chair and blew rings at the ceiling.

"So that's that," he remarked cheerfully, "and if you take my advice, Doune, you'll think twice before getting into debt again."

An angry look had come into the other's face.

"Look here, Prince, you've helped me out of a hole,

and I'm grateful, but when I want your advice I'll ask for it. We'd better talk business. You say there's about a thousand to come. I could do with a cheque as soon as you like."

Mr. Prince seemed to be suddenly embarrassed.

"Haven't you got the money yet?"

"Not all of it," admitted Mr. Prince. "I expect to get the rest on Monday or Tuesday."

"Well, you can give me a cheque dated Tuesday. That'll be good enough for me."

Mr. Prince's embarrassment was obviously increasing. "But I gave you your cheque."

Mr. Doune stared. "I've had £400, and I promised you an extra hundred if you sold the picture. Well, you got about fifteen hundred. Take off expenses, and that leaves about nine hundred for me, doesn't it?"

"Not exactly," said Mr. Prince.

"What the dickens d'you mean?"

"Well, you see, the nine hundred pounds or whatever it is is being invested by a man who understands these things—for me."

"For you? It's not your money."

"Oh yes," said Mr. Prince. "You see I——"

Mr. Doune had risen up, and stood threateningly over him. "Look here——" he began, but was interrupted.

"You're a pretty good fool, Doune, you know." Mr. Prince spoke very quietly. "If I were you, I should go straight in the future."

"What in hell's name——"

The door opened, and an elderly gentleman with a

white moustache and a large buttonhole came in smiling.

"Well, my boy, how are you? Not dressed? Gracious! And who——"

He was looking at Mr. Prince.

Mr. Doune was swallowing. He looked unhappily about him.

"My father," he managed to say, "Mr. Prince."

CHAPTER XV

Lord Bellchester shook hands in his bluff hearty way.

He did most things in a bluff hearty way, and enjoyed an empire-wide reputation as a bluff hearty man. It was often said of him that he was certainly one of the three most popular men in Great Britian. A man, they would tell you, with no nonsense about him—the sort of old-fashioned squire who said what he wanted to say: no more and no less. A man, they might inform you, of great guile when it was a question of horseflesh or shot-guns or the flight of a ball or a fight at the National Sporting Club, but a man with the simplicity of a child where other human beings were concerned.

A dear old boy, was the general verdict.

Certainly a dear old boy, but not nearly so simple as some clever and cunning people believed him to be. . . .

This morning he brought with him a whiff of the country, and as Mr. Prince took his hand he could not help wondering how this robust old gentleman who looked as if he must live to be a hundred and twenty had come to be the father of the rather anæmic and exotic Lavinia.

"Prince? Prince?" Lord Bellchester was repeating.

"But aren't you the youngster who stood by Lavery in the *King Henry?* Why, of course you are! We owe you our thanks. Well, well, I wish you could persuade my boy to get up at a reasonable hour. I was up myself at six o'clock this morning. Pulling up weeds. Good work, but it makes your back ache. Yes, and I caught the eight o'clock train. Met old Johnny Feathers on the platform. Awful old scoundrel, but very amusing. Light-weight champion in '92. Yes. I've come up on business."

He sat down on a sofa, and beamed at Mr. Prince.

"Business, father?"

"Yes, and you'll never guess what it is." He chuckled. "Fact is, I've had an offer for the Romney. Don't know that I want to sell. Don't think I do. In fact I'm certain I don't, but in these days when everything's run at a loss——Hullo, where is it?"

He was looking at the Cornish picture with a puzzled frown on his forehead. His son was staring appealingly at Mr. Prince. His anger was gone; he was far too genuinely frightened to feel any anger.

"I've moved it," he managed to say, and pointed with a trembling hand to the dark corner.

Lord Bellchester stared at him. "Why?" He turned his head. "What a place!" he exclaimed, and looked at Mr. Prince. "Fancy hiding away a treasure like that! Lavery, d'you realize that's a most valuable picture? It's the most valuable picture we've got. I don't know much about these things myself, but they tell me—— No, no, that won't do at all. You can't hide it away in a corner. Let's have it down."

"But—you——" Mr. Doune was painfully stammering. It is probable that he had never been so frightened in his life. His heart had suddenly refused to obey the usual laws. He could not look at his father.

Mr. Prince had been silent for the simple reason that he had nothing to say. He was aware that the wretched Lavery was making signs to him, but the old gentleman was waiting for his assistance, and he followed him into the dark corner. The portrait was taken down, and once again placed on a chair.

Lord Bellchester put on a pair of large tortoise-shell spectacles, and then uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Lavery, what does this mean?"

"I . . . what's—what's the matter?"

"Matter?" thundered the old gentleman, "this is a copy! What have you done with the original?" He no longer seemed to be aware of Mr. Prince's presence. "Well, where is the original? You've—you've sold it!"

The Honourable Lavery was trying to speak, but no words would come.

"Well?" Lord Bellchester looked very stern.

"I think perhaps——" Mr. Prince was beginning.

"Kindly allow my son to explain. Lavery, where is the Romney? How comes this copy to be here?"

There came a pause which seemed much longer to Mr. Prince than it was. And then young Doune broke down. To a running accompaniment of tears he attempted to tell a coherent story. Debts had mounted up again. . . . His allowance had never been very

large. Aunt Eleanor had always said so. . . . And then Prince's mention of a copy had put the idea of selling the Romney into his head. . . . Prince had lent him money. . . . He was sick and tired of everything. The other night he had intended to do away with himself. Everything was hopeless. He'd had no one to go to.

"So your friend Prince is also implicated? Well, I can understand why the portrait should be hidden away in a corner, but I am still waiting for information as to where my Romney is."

Mr. Prince opened his mouth to speak, but he was silenced by an imperious wave of Lord Bellchester's hand.

"You understand, of course, that this is a criminal matter? If you were not my son, you would be in gaol to-night. I told you a year ago you were not to be trusted, and you begged for one more chance. I gave it you, and this is what happens. Very well, you've proved unfit to look after yourself. You will have your things packed, and return home with me to-night. And you will work on one of the farms for your keep. Under my eye your criminal instincts may be kept in check, and I shall——"

The Honourable Lavery suddenly found his voice.

"You accuse me of all sorts of crimes," he cried, "but you don't see things from my point of view. You wanted me to come up to London, and everybody knows you refused to give me a decent allowance. But as for your calling me a criminal—— God!" he shouted, "you put the blame on to me, but if you want

to know, it's Prince who's the criminal. The Romney may not actually have been mine, but at least it belongs to the family. And it would have been mine when—when——"

"Yes, quite so," said Lord Bellchester coolly, "when I am underground."

"Well, but Prince has sold it for £1500, and refuses to pay over the money."

Lord Bellchester slowly turned his head. "Is that true, Mr. Prince?"

"No, sir, I have not sold the portrait."

"You damned liar!" shouted Mr. Doune in a fury. "You made a clear profit of more than nine hundred pounds. You told me you had."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Prince. "I did make about nine hundred pounds—rather more, I fancy—but it wasn't by selling the Romney."

"Then you've been betting, you rascal!"

To Mr. Doune's enormous surprise, his father was wagging a forefinger at Prince, and trying not to smile. The room seemed suddenly to turn upside down. His heart missed several beats. What on earth did it mean?"

"But I don't think I shall bet again in the future, sir," said Mr. Prince; "not unless you give me the same sort of tip as Zarathustra."

"H'm. That may or may not happen, but when people help me I like to help them. That horse of mine——"

"Father!"

"My dear boy," said Lord Bellchester, looking

rather sadly at his son, "you're a damned fool, and I'm tired of having a damned fool for a son. That Romney has not been sold, and if you don't believe me, you've only got to look at the chair there, where you will see it nicely varnished and cleaned. Mr. Prince, whom I have met several times during the last week, has more wisdom in his little finger than you have in your whole carcase. I imagined so much when I heard what he had done for you in the *King Henry*. Now I know. When he came to see me five or six days ago, and explained the position, I was within an ace of losing my temper and doing something for which I might have been very sorry. Instead, I fell in with Mr. Prince's little plan. We agreed to meet here this morning. I have repaid him the five hundred, as agreed, and I understand he was sensible enough to put about a fifth of that sum on my horse Zarathustra which won the Bridbury Stakes on Wednesday. I don't often give tips, but when I do—— As for you, I will pay all your debts on condition that you work on the estate for a year and give up Miss What-ever-her-name-is. If you don't care to do this, you may go to the devil as fast as you please—in which case Mr. Prince has my permission to return you your revolver. But I rather hope," he finished, "that this uncomfortable ten minutes may have taught you a lesson."

"But the best of it is," said Mr. Prince in the course of his promised explanation to Miss Esmonde that

evening, "I believe the old boy is going to change his mind."

"What about?"

"Well, you see, that day when we went to Brighton, I didn't go to the Welkenbergs at all, as you thought, but only to see Lord Bellchester. I wanted to see whether he'd sell—of course I knew from the start that the Romney didn't belong to Lavinia—and I mentioned the Americans. There wasn't much doing—about a sale, I mean, but I said I'd be in the neighbourhood the next day, and I saw him again, and then I was driven to the Welkenbergs, and told them about the portrait, and what Casdagli had offered. We had a long talk, and they said I might go up to £3000, so long as none of the dealers came into the business. So back I went to Lord Bellchester, and he wasn't there, and I had a fearful business to find him—I found him at last at a cattle-show, and we went into a sort of pub; and I told him what Welkenberg had said. But the old boy wouldn't hear of it. He wasn't going to sell, he said, to any beastly foreigner. So there it was. But I told him I'd been on the yacht, and I said the Welkenbergs were friends of the Duke's, and most amusing people, and said I thought they'd give even more than three thousand if necessary. But he only shook his head, and began mumbling about Lavinia."

"But, Oliver, I don't understand. Where was the picture all this time?"

"Oh, of course there never was a copy. The portrait was just being varnished, because I'd read in the

book Mr. Waynflete sent me that these old pictures ought periodically to be overhauled—to prevent 'em from cracking or something, and it was all part of our scheme, don't you see. I knew Lavinia would have to have a lesson, or he'd go on getting into debts and making a fool of himself. But Lord Bellchester's such a good sort that he was as keen on my scheme as I was. I think he likes me, you know, because he told me to back that horse of his."

"Yes, well, but what then?"

"Oh, well, that day when you wanted to come in the car, I took the portrait, all varnished, you know, with me, and fetched the Welkenbergs and took them to Bellchester Castle, which isn't far off, and they got on splendidly with the old boy. Talked about horses and things. And he knows Kirkaldy, you see. So we talked of yachting and the Navy and——"

"But wouldn't he like to get the three thousand?"

Mr. Prince shook his head, and smiled down into her eager face. "It wasn't any good," he told her. "Of course when I saw in the paper that his horse had won I didn't mind so much, but—to-day when we left poor Lavinia crying his eyes out, Lord Bellchester told me he'd had another offer of £4000, and as I told you, he's thinking of changing his mind. In which case, you see, I'd get a commission of—er——"

"Oh, Oliver, how lovely!"

He broke off his calculations to kiss her.

CHAPTER XVI

And then there followed a little series of reverses which culminated in a deplorable evening at Mason's Club.

The reverses themselves were not of a kind to lead to the bankruptcy court, although they were mostly financial; but Mr. Prince felt that they had no right whatever to come. Not for a moment did he cease to exercise the most powerful vigilance, and only once did he allow himself—excusably, as anybody would admit—to forget his usual devilish cunning. No, it just seemed as if Providence, usually so helpful, had decided, for some unknown reason, to lead him temporarily astray.

Everything, indeed, went wrong. It went so lamentably wrong that a time came when Mr. Prince was within an ace of giving up all thoughts of a career in high finance and deciding to become a policeman in the unhealthiest part of Central Africa.

It all began with the arrival of Major Farnham's letter.

At the time Mr. Prince was at home, the successful financier who was spending most of the day studying the current financial news. His banking account had become so agreeably large—even after a substantial present to his mother—as to deserve the

description of "swollen." And even Mr. Carstairs was treating him with a new sort of respect. As for his mother and Mr. Waynflete—well, never again would they look on him as a kid. Life, moreover, in the little house had become considerably more comfortable with the importation of Jane, who was an excellent cook and knew how your clothes ought to be kept. And it was additionally pleasant to have Jane about the house when you had made yourself entirely responsible for her wages.

Also, there was that letter, three times a week, from Chelsea.

Affairs, in fact, were going very well, and the outlook for the future was rosy. It became rosier, too, when the Major's letter arrived, because Mr. Prince had been informed that his friends the Welkenbergs had been hurriedly recalled to Chicago. As a result he had been uncertain as to what he should do. An invitation had come only a week ago to visit the Sussex castle, and he had been looking forward to further profitable transactions. With his patrons, however, in the States—and they were expected to be away for some months—it became necessary to look elsewhere, and at exactly the right moment Major Farnham had asked for his help.

The letter was certainly most intriguing. The Farnham Automobile Hiring Company, it seemed, was not doing very well. Quite the reverse. It was being starved for want of capital, and the Major had written to him as "a man likely to know rich and influential people who would be willing to invest."

A minimum of £7000 was required if things were to be put on a really paying basis, and if Mr. Prince could produce this sum a substantial interest in the business was to be his.

A substantial interest! In other words, no doubt, a parternership. Or, to be more correct, a directorship. All successful financiers became company directors sooner or later and had their speeches reported in the newspapers. And to be a director meant——

But £7000 was a very large sum. Mr. Prince had no intention of allowing anybody else to think that he considered £7000 a very large sum or anything like it, but in his own private thoughts it remained most uncomfortably large, and you couldn't get away from the fact. Seven thousand pounds meant an income of £350 at least—a flea-bite to a man like Cornelius Welkenberg, but a small fortune to most of his own acquaintances. And yet it would have to be obtained.

Mr. Prince took a walk on to the quay, sat down by the water's edge, and communed with himself.

The swollen banking account was useless for this particular business—already certain investments had been made—but other people had swollen accounts as well as himself, and they would have to be approached. Query—on whom to begin? There was the Duke, of course, but the Duke was cruising somewhere near to the Orkneys, and apparently could do nothing without his trustees. A cable to America? But if Mr. Welkenberg was busy in Chicago, he would probably not be interested in the Farnham Automobile

Hiring Company. Besides, in this kind of affair it was important that you should see the possible investor and explain in person the various advantages which he would obtain. But who was there? Lord Bellchester? Well, perhaps: but Lord Bellchester was much more interested in horses than in cars, and he was not nearly so rich as most people thought him. Lord Oxney? Lord Oxney was certainly interested in motoring, and he should be asked. Supposing, however, all Oxney's money was already invested?

"I'll write to Mr. Esmonde," said Mr. Prince, and immediately decided that it would be very much better to see Mr. Esmonde. And then, unwittingly, he allowed his thoughts to remove themselves for a time from all financial questions.

A director of a large company would certainly have a house of his own, probably a London house as well as a cottage in the country. He might have his mother to live with him and look after the servants. And there would probably be a couple of rooms for an old friend like Mr. Waynflete. Also, a director would marry, even though he happened to be rather younger than most other directors. He would marry, and allow his wife quite a decent sum to spend on clothes. A director's wife ought to be well dressed. Well-dressed wives, indeed, were often able to be of great help to their husbands in a financial career. They gave dinner-parties and things of that kind.

And marriage itself would be the most frightfully exciting adventure.

Mr. Prince seemed to be seeing a fashionable church at which a wedding had just been soleminzed. He saw himself as the groom in the smartest clothes, and a naval officer—probably young Ashley—as his best man. He saw a very shy Doris on his arm, and a tearful Aunt Mabel, and Mr. Waynflete in a curiously-cut frock-coat, and his mother in purple silk. Then he saw himself in one of his own cars driving away with his bride, and Ashley or some other idiot had tied a white satin slipper at the back.

Yes, but he must first become a director. . . .

"Seven thousand pounds!" he repeated, and at that moment it seemed impossible to believe that anybody could have such a sum to hand over for investment. On the other hand, he did get on well with people, particularly with rich people. They liked him. And he was one of the lucky ones. Things happened to him which didn't happen to other people.

"I'll go," he said; "I'll go at once."

This time, however, his luck seemed dead out. He travelled first-class to London, but the carriage was full of the most impossible people, and no station-master mistook him for a peer. At Waterloo he chose out the smartest-looking taxicab, and the taxicab broke down on Waterloo Bridge. And at the hotel—it was not the Savoy or the Ritz but the Northumberland, a much cheaper place, he had been told, and quite as central—he was given a room which was not at all suited to a financier in process of becoming a director. Moreover he was astonished and hurt to be told on

the telephone that the whole Esmonde family had gone that very morning on a visit to a Warwickshire aunt, and would be away for ten days. Well, of course, they hadn't known that he would be coming to London, and Doris, he remembered, had mentioned something about the visit in one of her letters, but really——

That evening after dinner he was introduced to Mr. Gordon Soames, a meeting, as it happened, not without importance. Mr. Soames came to the Northumberland Hotel with his friend Major Farnham.

"You see," explained the Major, as they sat down in a corner of the hotel lounge, "I'd already promised to dine with him, when your wire came; so I've brought him along."

Mr. Soames proved to be excellent company, and for a while Mr. Prince forgot his disappointment. Mr. Soames, he gathered, was a barrister with the reputation of being the cleverest amateur conjurer in England. He was a tall, thin, lantern-jawed man who looked as though he ate nothing solid and had just been condemned to a long term of imprisonment. When he spoke it was in mournful accents, and there was a permanent frown on his forehead. Yet he told the most amusing stories—in a tragic voice and as though any point they might possess was wholly beyond his own comprehension. And at the most unexpected moments, he would take a ring or a coin or a coloured handkerchief casually out of his pocket, and instantly and without apparent effort change the object into something quite different. On one occa-

sion he caused a half-filled liqueur-glass to disappear miraculously into space, and he changed a half-crown, borrowed from Mr. Prince, into a bone counter, and seemed surprised that so simple an exposition of magic could afford any amusement.

"The easiest thing in the world," he said in his doleful way. "That counter has cost you half a crown, but I dare say you won't grudge it. Put it back in your pocket, and don't lend money again."

Mr. Prince was highly impressed. He put the counter into his pocket, and laughingly entered into the spirit of the thing.

(He was still more highly impressed when on undressing that night he found that the counter was not in his pocket at all, though the half-crown was.)

"I can't think how you do it," said he, when a white handkerchief had just been dyed under his nose.

"Nor I," exclaimed the Major, "and if I had those fingers of yours, I wouldn't be wasting my time hiring out cars."

A faint smile appeared on the barrister's face. "What would you do then?"

Major Farnham winked at Mr. Prince. "Try a little card-sharping, I expect."

"And look to me to defend you at the Old Bailey?"

"Anything to help a friend, my dear fellow." He turned to Mr. Prince. "How'd you like to play cards with him?"

"Cards!" cried Mr. Soames, "you don't imagine I play cards?"

"I should think," ventured Mr. Prince, "you'd play jolly well."

"It's a mug's game," the barrister told him. "I mean, if you play for stakes."

"But if you play cards," remarked the Major, "you must play for money."

"And small stakes," added Mr. Prince, "can't hurt anybody."

Mr. Soames looked at him. "Quite sure?" he asked. "But perhaps you're a born gambler?"

"Oh no. I like a game sometimes, but that's all. We used to play on board. Bridge or poker, you know."

"Lucky?"

Mr. Prince nodded. "I generally do manage to hold good cards, and then of course at poker—well, there's a lot of cunning in the way you play."

The barrister smiled as he took a pack of cards from his pocket. He shuffled, held the pack out fan-wise, and invited Mr. Prince to take any five cards that he liked. "Pick out a nice poker hand for yourself, and we'll see if I can't beat you."

Mr. Prince very carefully ignored all the cards which he thought the barrister wished him to take, and to his own great chagrin found that he had the two, four and five of spades, and the three and nine of hearts.

"Now pick a hand for me."

Mr. Prince picked out five further cards in the same careful way, and found that he had drawn the five top honours in spades.

"But how on earth——"

"Your luck must have changed," said Mr. Soames in his solemn way, as he gathered up the cards. "You must have offended the gods."

And really, it did seem as if the gods had become offended, for during the next few days nothing went right. . . .

The campaign was opened in Major Farnham's little office. "The position, you see," said the Major, "is more or less this. The new premises and new stock including Mayfair Motors Limited which we want to buy up, will take about ten thousand pounds. I'm good for a thousand, and old Burgess is going to put in about the same, if there's any chance of the rest being obtained. And then there's Harry Ryde who——"

"What name?" asked Mr. Prince quickly.

"Sir Henry Ryde. Old pal of mine. In the Glamorgans together, when he hadn't a bean. But a brother of his was killed, so he came into things. Why, d'you know him?"

"No, but a man I know was talking about him."

"Well, he's a real good sportsman. He's got money in the business, as it is, and he's practically promised me a couple of thousand more if—— Well, you see what it is, Prince. We've got to find a big man who won't mind waiting a bit for his money. Otherwise——" He shrugged his shoulders. "For all I'm getting out of it now, I might just as well be in Honolulu. And every day it will get worse. We shall be squeezed out of existence."

There followed details of the various rival concerns which seemed eager to squeeze the Major's small company out of existence. Mr. Prince listened, and promised to do his best.

And later that morning he began to work. He interviewed almost everybody he knew in London, and obtained—nothing. He saw the Admiral after much trouble with clerks and secretaries, and the Admiral seemed delighted to see him. But when the question of a possible investment in the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company was broached, the Admiral was afraid he could do nothing, and begged Mr. Prince to excuse him. The Second Sea Lord, it seemed, was waiting to see him. Mr. Prince walked to Grosvenor Place, and called on the Ashleys. Ashley himself was away, but his father was at home and invited him into his study. And there Mr. Prince did his utmost to persuade the old gentleman that the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company was the finest thing of its kind in the country. Mr. Ashley refused to believe him. Mr. Ashley even seemed sorry to learn that Mr. Prince was having anything to do with such a business.

There followed half a dozen similar rebuffs. No one appeared to possess one farthing to invest in anything at all, and even those who fancied they knew people who might have a little spare cash, could find nothing to say in favour of an automobile hiring company. The thing, they declared, was being overdone.

Mr. Prince announced his failure to the Major, but

asked for the loan of a car. He drove down into Sussex. Lord Bellchester expressed great pleasure at seeing him again, and gave him another tip—Bluemantle for the Rutlandshire Handicap—but he obviously looked on Major Farnham and Major Farnham's business with the deepest suspicion, and advised Mr. Prince to have nothing to do with it.

"But with a little more capital, don't you see——"

Lord Bellchester didn't see. Nothing could make him see.

And much the same reception awaited Mr. Prince at Oxney Towers. Lord Oxney gave him a warm welcome, and renewed his invitation to shoot partridges, but as for a commercial proposition—well, Mr. Prince was advised to abolish the present iniquitous taxes before inviting fellows to invest.

No, things refused to go right, and when some stock which he had bought on Mr. Esmonde's recommendation fell two whole points, Mr. Prince experienced those feelings of despair which he presumed were common amongst ruined gamblers. And then at a moment when the letter from Doris was three days overdue, and the Major was talking of emigration, and his hotel bill had assumed quite Savoyan proportions, and nothing in the nature of an adventure, financial or otherwise, showed the least inclination to come his way, he met Sir Henry Ryde: a meeting which led to that disastrous evening at Mason's Club.

It was his own fault, of course; but that only made matters worse. He ought never to have played. He

had never intended to play, least of all at Mason's Club. But play he did, and not all his cunning could alter the poor cards he held.

It all happened very simply. He was sitting in Major Farnham's office one morning when a young man whom he had seen once or twice at the Northumberland Hotel strolled in.

"Well, my dear Gilbert," said the newcomer, "anything fresh? Oh, sorry, I thought you were alone."

"Hullo, Harry, come in. You don't know Mr. Oliver Prince, do you? Sir Henry Ryde."

So this was the man who had rooked Lavinia! But—surely not? Mr. Prince had hardly shaken hands with the baronet before he was certain that he would like him. There was something about his good-natured face which inspired confidence. Lavinia must have been talking through his hat. In a little while, indeed, he was smiling to himself at Doune's ridiculous accusations. Lavinia, he reflected, had probably been drunk at the time when he had lost so heavily at Mason's Club. Sir Henry Ryde was quite charming. And he was a most interesting talker—on the serious side. A candidate for Parliament, Mr. Prince gathered, somewhere in his native Devon. They talked politics until the Major was summoned to the garage.

"One of the best," remarked Sir Henry, offering his cigarette-case. "He really does deserve to make a success of things."

"I hope he does," said Mr. Prince warmly, and then he added: "Aren't you staying at the Northumberland?"

"Yes."

"I thought'd seen you about. I'm there for a little while myself."

"Good, then I expect I'll see something of you."

They met again that evening in the hotel, and over a cocktail became friendly. They dined at the same table, and once again discussed the affairs of the nation, including the future of the Navy. Sir Henry Ryde had apparently made a study of naval problems, and Mr. Prince's heart warmed towards him. Incidentally he promised to dine with his new friend at Mason's Club the next night.

He dined, and was invited to play bridge for what appeared to be very moderate stakes.

Almost at once he became aware that the atmosphere about him was strange and unfriendly. The little dining-room at Mason's was the cosiest possible place, and its members the best of good fellows. But the card-room—well, the card-room was quite different.

In some queer way, too, that long thin face of Mr. Soames seemed to be looking down at him from somewhere. And he knew that he would lose. Luckily it wouldn't matter. The stakes were low: very low, he considered, for a really smart Club.

Sixpence a hundred. Practically nothing.

Incidentally he took an acute dislike to a man called Brand who, as it happened, remained Sir Henry's partner during most of the rubbers.

He had lost about one thousand five hundred points on the evening's play, and was preparing to pay over his few shillings when he was shocked to discover

that the stakes had not been the sixpence-a-hundred he had supposed, but sixpenny points.

Thirty-eight pounds gone in a couple of hours! And he could say nothing at all. The mistake had been his. They had asked him if "sixpence" would suit him, and he had agreed. There was nothing to do but to pay up and look pleasant.

The gods were most certainly offended.

CHAPTER XVII

Two mornings later Mr. Prince lay in bed, looking at the untouched breakfast by his side in disgust. He had the worst sort of headache. He felt unable to eat, and disinclined to get up. Not for a considerable time had he been in such a poor temper. At the moment it seemed to him that London was an entirely hateful and despicable city, while its inhabitants were either misers or thieves. With all his heart he wished that he had taken no notice of Major Farnham's letter, and stayed down at Bournsea.

Who could have believed that a man with his devilish cunning could have lost £38 in an evening at a game of bridge?

Well, it only showed you. . . .

At any rate it was never going to happen again. He had had his lesson.

From the moment when he had paid away those bank-notes over the table, Sir Henry Ryde had ceased in his eyes to be a sportsman, and Mr. Brand, if not an actual cheat, was clearly a very sharp customer. They ought, he repeatedly told himself, to have warned him. Any real sportsman would have made the stakes absolutely clear before the game began. "Sixpence" very definitely meant sixpence a hundred. You could ask anybody you liked: they would all tell

you that it meant sixpence a hundred. Pride had kept him silent at the time, but in some way or other he was going to get his own back.

Very decidedly he was going to get his own back.

At the moment, however, no good method had suggested itself, and his smart had not become less when he had run across Gordon Soames again on the previous day. Mr. Prince, explaining what had happened, expected commiseration. Instead, Mr. Soames had been unkind enough to say that if anybody chose to play with the sharks at Mason's he deserved to lose £380 at least.

Whereupon Mr. Prince had been rude, and only regained his usual good spirits when the barrister performed more wonders with cards, and pretended to explain how his tricks were done.

No, things had gone hopelessly wrong.

To-day, however, there was just a chance that affairs might improve. At eleven o'clock he had an appointment with the marine superintendent of the Blue Cross Line—Captain Pelly had been a friend of his in Sandmouth days—who was going to introduce him to one of his directors, a very rich man who might be interested in the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company. And he was to lunch with Mr. Soames. Also at a few minutes past three he would know whether Lord Bellchester's horse Bluemantle had presented him with seventy pounds or cost him a tenner. He smiled as he remembered Zarathustra's win, and the headache showed signs of disappearing. Then he remembered the game with Sir Henry Ryde, and the pain returned.

But he hadn't finished with the baronet and his friends just yet. To-night, he had, rather rashly perhaps, promised to play poker with Sir Henry and three other men, here in the hotel.

And at poker, as he had found in the *King Henry,* devilish cunning usually paid very well.

He arrived at Captain Pelly's office on the stroke of eleven, and found the marine superintendent delighted to see him, but apologetic.

"Awfully sorry, my lad, but old Mackness has gone up to Stirling, and may be away for a week. I only heard myself this morning, or I'd have let you know. Have a cigar."

Mr. Prince hid his disappointment as well as he could. "I'm not old enough for a cigar," said he.

Captain Pelly chuckled into his beard. Young Prince with his cheeky ways had always amused him.

"Well, if you don't want a cigar, what do you want?"

"Money."

"Heavens, you don't really expect to find money these days, do you? But I tell you what, my lad, I believe I really can do something for you. When I saw you the other day, there was nothing much doing, but one of our youngsters is down with scarlet fever or some such complaint, and I can give you a ship."

Mr. Prince was smiling and shaking his head. "Thanks very much," he said, "but I don't want a job just at the moment."

"Then you're lucky. Most fellows nowadays seem to spend their time looking for a job."

"I know, but, you see, I've taken to finance, and that was why I wanted to see Mr. Mackness. If he——"

There was a knock on the door, and before Captain Pelly could speak it had been opened. A small, thin, hollow-eyed, clean-shaven man came in. He smiled faintly at the superintendent, and then saw Mr. Prince.

"Oh, sorry," he said; "I thought you were alone."

"Come in, come in." Captain Pelly had risen. "You needn't be afraid of young Prince. Don't you know him?" He had shaken hands with the newcomer, and turned to the boy. "This is Tom Lansing. I thought you were in the *Tigris* together."

"I don't think so," said Lansing shaking hands, and it struck Mr. Prince that he had never seen a man who looked so ill.

"And what brings you to town?" asked Captain Pelly.

"Usual thing. I want a ship."

The superintendent looked embarassed. "But didn't you get my letter?"

Tom Lansing nodded. "You said there might be a chance."

"A hundred to one chance against, I said, Tom. No, I'm sorry, old man, but I don't see what we can do. Three or four senior men like yourself are on the shelf."

Mr. Prince had never seen Tom Lansing before in his life, but all his sympathy had already been roused.

Here was another poor wretch out of a job, and ill into the bargain. He felt intensely sorry. Obviously the man was hard up. "He probably doesn't get enough to eat," he reflected, and was conscious of a strong desire to help.

There was a tiny uncomfortable pause, and then Tom Lansing lit a cigarette. "Oh, well," said he, and forced a curious little chuckle, "that's that."

Captain Pelly looked relieved. "In about three months' time," he said, "I hope things will be better."

"Good." Tom Lansing looked at Mr. Prince. "He's a bit of a tyrant, don't you think?"

Mr. Prince smiled. So the man had taken his gruel like a sportsman. "Of course he is," he agreed.

Captain Pelly burst into laughter. "My lad, I shall have to warn you against Master Tom. He's always trying to take my character away. Says the most dreadful things. I can't think how any girl ever married him. He's not at all the sort of husband I'd like my wife to have."

"You're jealous," retorted Tom Lansing.

"Am I? Well, my dear Tom, I don't think you need worry. But at any rate Mrs. Lansing can't accuse me of taking *your* character away."

"I'm not so sure. Last time I came up to see you, you accused me of being a spendthrift and a wastrel and goodness knows what else."

"Did I? Well, if I did, you probably deserved it. And you're a fearful gambler, you know, Tom. I wouldn't trust you with a sovereign. Sitting up half the night——"

Mr. Prince looked quickly at Tom Lansing. So the man was a gambler. Captain Pelly, he thought, might have been speaking half in fun, but there had been a serious note somewhere in his tones. And could it be that there was some particular reason for Lansing not getting a ship? It might be so, though he hoped it was not.

Lansing was laughing. "All right, all right. We've all got our little vices. I like a good game of cards, but just because you once happened to find me playing rather late in the evening—— However, if I stay in London for a few days this time, I'll try to mend my evil ways."

A clerk came in just then, and Mr. Prince departed. . . .

At luncheon that day with Mr. Soames he was unusually silent, but he could not forget that look on Tom Lansing's face. In all probability he would never see the man again, but there was something about him which continued to demand his sympathy. Married and ill and out of a job. The rottenest luck. Things had been going badly for himself, but his banking account was still swollen, and something was sure to turn up. But a man like Lansing had most probably been fighting against odds all his life. No doubt a careful sailor, but a man who would never really succeed because—well, because there was always something against him. Illness or gambling; that kind of thing. There were men, he knew, who had never been able to help themselves. Generally it was their own fault,

but with Lansing it might have been the sheerest bad luck.

"Still nursing your grievances?" asked the barrister at last. He had come to the conclusion that the boy was an unusually stimulating youngster, but expected a little more return for his hospitality. "You're about as lively as an owl."

Mr. Prince pulled himself together with an effort. After all Tom Lansing might be responsible for his own troubles, and one's sympathy could often be misplaced. "Sorry," he said, "but I was thinking of a poor devil I met this morning out of a job."

"It strikes me you're in much the same position yourself."

"I'm not married, and I don't look half-starved."

"You can thank the gods, then, for two small mercies."

Mr. Prince smiled. "You married?" he asked.

Mr. Soames looked terribly shocked. "Surely I don't look it?" A queer little chuckle came from his lips. "No, my dear boy, I took up conjuring instead. Much cheaper in the long run, and just as satisfactory."

"You do talk nonsense," Mr. Prince told him, and just then a wholly new Idea floated into his head, an Idea which seemed startlingly brilliant if a little dangerous.

"It's my trade," declared the barrister. "I get money by talking nonsense—in wig and gown."

"Money," repeated the boy. "Well, I'm going to make money to-day. Like to follow my example?"

"I might make an exception in your case," replied Mr. Soames, "though as a rule I don't bet. What's the horse?"

"Bluemantle," said Mr. Prince, wondering how the other had guessed at his meaning, "and the tip came straight from the stable. It's something very special indeed."

"H'm, then I'll telephone to the estimable Duggie. And if it wins——"

"If it wins," interrupted the boy, "you've got to do something for me."

"That's fair. What is it?"

Mr. Prince put out his right hand with the fingers stretched out. "Think I could manage one or two of those tricks of yours?" he asked. "I used to palm halfpennies as a kid."

Mr. Soames stared at him. "And why this new enthusiasm?" he demanded.

There came a little pause.

"I was thinking of—of exposing a cheat. But I shouldn't be able to do that, I expect, if I couldn't show how the thing was done."

Mr. Soames assumed his most mournful expression. "The young man from the country preparing to beard the lion once again in his den? Is that wise, my friend? I thought you had finished with lions and sharks and people of that kind."

"It may not be wise," retorted Mr. Prince, now very full of his Idea, "but will you do it? I don't mean pretending to show me. I mean *really* explaining." He looked very serious.

"My charges——" began the barrister, and his eyes were full of fun, but the boy stopped him.

"I know I shan't be able to do much myself," he went on, "but I'd be most awfully grateful if you'd show me how they were done. Of course I wouldn't tell a soul."

Mr. Soames pretended to consider the proposition. He was greatly amused. "But Bluemantle hasn't won yet," he pointed out.

"But it will win."

"Well, if it does win, I dare say I might let you in to one or two tricks of the trade, but for the Lord's sake don't do anything rash."

Mr. Prince frowned in his comical way. "You've got to take risks," he declared.

"Have you?"

"You're going to risk a pound or two on Bluemantle, aren't you?"

"One to you," said Mr. Soames. "All right, it's a bargain."

Lord Bellchester's horse won by a head, and its success was celebrated immediately afterwards in Mr. Soames's flat. Mr. Prince was duly initiated into some of the subtler methods of card-manipulation and proved an apt pupil. And although he realized soon enough that years of practice would be necessary before he could hope to make his fingers work the miracles which to the barrister appeared so easy, he felt confident that should a sharper attempt any of his tricks at the card-table, they would not pass unobserved.

"It seems to me," he remarked, "that the great secret is misdirection."

"Of course it is," agreed his teacher, who was now thoroughly enjoying himself. "You make your audience think you're doing one thing, while you're really doing something quite different."

"Well, if everything else fails, I shall become a crook on one of the big liners."

"Right you are, and I'll defend you if anything goes wrong."

Mr. Prince expressed his gratitude for the lesson—it had lasted for more than two hours—and returned to his hotel to dress. On this occasion the process was unusually slow, because he wasted a great deal of time in front of the mirror—not, however, to observe his personal appearance, but to watch his fingers during their manipulation of a new pack of cards.

(It was really quite astonishing what you could do. When Doris returned he would have something to show her. . . .)

The headache had completely disappeared.

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT evening things did not go exactly as he had expected.

There was a game of poker, it is true, and Mr. Prince had a chance to show his cunning at the game. Indeed he rose from the table a good winner. But by the sheer cussedness of things, this was the one game of poker of all others at which he would have preferred not to win. . . .

At seven o'clock he ordered a cocktail to be brought to him in the lounge. He sat down for a quiet think. And his mind was being given to a particular movement of the third finger of the right hand required for a difficult "pass," when he became aware that somebody was looking at him.

"Hello," said Tom Lansing, "dreaming of beautiful ladies?"

Mr. Prince was faintly surprised. Somehow Lansing was the last man he had expected to see.

"Hullo," he returned, "are you staying in the hotel?"

"Lord, no," laughed the other. "When I come to London I stay in a tiny room close by—in one of the streets off the Strand. The landlady's an old nurse of mine. A dreadful old tyrant. But I'm out on the spree to-night, so dropped in here to have a look round."

"I see." Mr. Prince was trying not to look at Lansing's country clothes. Yes, he was most frightfully sorry for the fellow. There was something about his eyes which made you like him. "I say," he went on, "I'm going to dine in a minute or two. Won't you dine with me? I backed a winner to-day," he added smiling, "so we might celebrate the occasion."

Tom Lansing seemed embarrassed. "That's very nice of you," he said, "but I haven't brought any clothes with me."

"That doesn't matter."

"But you look so smart, and I feel such a bumpkin."

"Oh, but do come," urged Mr. Prince. "People wear all sorts of clothes these days."

"Well, if you're sure you don't mind——" He still seemed embarrassed. "I really don't see why you should ask me. We've only——"

"Yes, but I want to celebrate. Do sit down, and I'll order another cocktail. Funny meeting you like that this morning, wasn't it? I like old Pelly, you know. He used to live near us in Sandmouth. Near to Bournsea. I expect you know it. I'm having a Martini. Will you have the same? Good. They make 'em rather well here." He was talking quickly to hide his own nervousness. He was afraid lest Tom Lansing might feel uncomfortable. He felt sorrier than ever for his guest. The man looked so ill, and was so obviously trying to forget his disappointment of the morning. Well, he would order a very good dinner and a bottle of champagne.

"And what," asked Lansing in a little while, "about

the rest of the evening? Should we look in at a music-hall? I feel like a little dissipation."

Mr. Prince had almost decided to forget his engagement with Sir Henry Ryde when that gentleman appeared in the lounge and saw him and came up.

"Hullo, Prince, I'm sorry to say Gerald Brand's just telephoned to say he can't play to-night. Rather a nuisance, but it can't be helped. Five is so much nicer at poker than four, I always think."

Mr. Prince introduced the two men to each other, and became more nervous than ever. He had remembered what Captain Pelly had said.

"Were you speaking of poker?" asked Tom Lansing, and Mr. Prince could not help noticing that a new eager look had come into his face.

Sir Henry Ryde was holding a match to his cigarette. "Yes, we've fixed up a game in my room to-night. Play yourself?"

"Oh yes. I think it's my favourite game."

"Then you'd better join us. That'll make five, if you will."

"Thanks very much. I'd be delighted. As a matter of fact I was just wondering what to do after dinner when you came up."

Mr. Prince smiled uneasily. He had no fear of high stakes for himself, but if Lansing were really the gambler that Captain Pelly had called him, the evening's entertainment might prove serious for him. Also his presence might interfere with the working of that new Idea. In fact it might be advisable to postpone the game altogether. Yet how could he? Lansing

had become his guest and wanted to play. Already, indeed, he and Ryde had begun to talk of hands they had held. . . . And at dinner his discomfiture increased. He began to understand what a reckless man Lansing under certain circumstances could be, and felt the cares of a new responsibility. Yet, was it, after all, his business if a fellow chose to gamble? Wasn't Lansing very considerably his senior? Besides, the man might be lucky and win. Then why worry, particularly as his guest seemed to be enjoying his dinner so much?

For all that, he continued to worry. Suppose—the game to-night was not played fairly? Brand was not coming, but two other men—guards officers—who belonged to Mason's Club had been invited. And Ryde himself——

Was he being beastly suspicious? Thinking of that disastrous evening in his bed it had been easy to believe that Lavery Doune had not been the only victim of the "sharks" at Mason's Club, but here, at the same dinner-table with the man, listening to his amiable chatter, it was impossible to believe him capable of descending to sharp practices. Sir Henry Ryde was a man of considerable means who had invested money in the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company, a man of position who had been chosen as candidate for Parliament. A man of that kind would never dream of having anything to do with crooks and card-sharpers.

In that case, however, surely he ought to have made it quite clear for what stakes they had been playing?

"I've got to be most frightfully cunning," thought

Mr. Prince, and remembered his new sleight-of-hand knowledge.

Five gentlemen played poker that evening in Sir Henry Ryde's room, but before the first hand had been dealt, Mr. Prince was surprised to receive an invitation into his host's bedroom, and still more astonished to hear what Sir Henry had to say.

"I've been rather worried, Prince," he began, "about that game of ours the other night. Brand seems to think you may not have understood the stakes we were playing for. It never occurred to me you weren't quite clear about them, but Brand imagined—— Oh, I hate talking like this, because we may be all wrong, but if you were misled, we think we ought to repay you, and —er, apologize. You see——"

"Oh, but——" Mr. Prince felt exceedingly awkward. All his suspicions had disappeared at the first words, and he was about to declare that he had fully understood, when Mr. Soames's long face seemed to be grinning rather contemptuously at him. "The sharks at Mason's Club." Was this sudden apology another move, perhaps, in a sinister game, calculated to put him off his guard? He was looking closely into Sir Henry Ryde's face. Surely it expressed nothing but an honest intention to set matters right, if a mistake had been made?

"You see," the other was continuing, "we do play high at Mason's, and I'm such a casual devil myself that it never struck me you might not want to play so high. But Brand seems to have had it on his con-

science, and he made me promise to speak to you to-night."

"But of course it's all right," Mr. Prince managed to say. "I quite—understand. It was nice of you to——"

"Then that's all right," said Sir Henry, obviously relieved. "But I didn't want to play with you again without telling you what we thought. By the way, we'd better settle now about the stakes to-night. Any objection to ten shilling rises?"

"None for myself, but I don't know about Lansing."

"He seems to have played a good deal."

"Yes, but I'm afraid he's not very flush. Out of a job for the moment."

"I see. Well, he can choose the stakes himself," declared Sir Henry, and they returned to the sitting-room.

To Mr. Prince's surprise Tom Lansing suggested that their host had better choose the stakes, and made no objection to ten shilling rises. The game began quietly. There were no very high hands, and at the end of an hour's play no one had won or lost more than a few pounds. Lansing himself was a small winner. But after a short interval for refreshments the game took on a different aspect. The betting became brisker, more counters appeared on the table, and Sir Henry, as host, began entering an account of sums borrowed in his note-book. And then there came the first of several remarkable hands. A full-house held by Tom Lansing was beaten by four threes held by one

of the subalterns. From that moment Lansing's luck deserted him. He held splendid cards, but was always just beaten. Mr. Prince was winning, but even when he scooped in a large jack-pot, he was not wholly enjoying himself. He could think of nothing but this unfortunate sailor. Any question of unfair play had been hurled out of court. All memory of his latest Idea was gone. Nothing seemed to matter except that Tom Lansing's luck should change. He was a good loser, but he must have lost the best part of £50!

And when, somwhere near midnight, the unfortunate man's four tens were beaten by four queens in Sir Henry Ryde's hands, Mr. Prince was conscious of a wild desire to sweep all the cards and counters off the table and burn his host's note-book. He was still winning himself, they were all winners, all except Lansing who at each hand was betting more recklessly.

What was to be done? If things continued in this way, how could the poor chap possibly pay? Was there no way of stopping him before he was utterly ruined? And what if he himself were to be held responsible for having introduced the man to the others? What a fool he had been to play at all! This was not the kind of adventure for which he had come to London. All the pleasure of winning for himself had gone. And it was impossible not to see that Lansing was now in a state of despair which was making him stake absurdly.

Then, as though Fate enjoyed mocking him, the sailor staked high on a bluff—a pair of nines—and was beaten by another bluff—a pair of knaves! Mr.

Prince wanted to cry out. He managed to catch his host's eye. Surely this was enough? Sir Henry seemed to understand, for he looked at his watch, and proposed a final round of jack-pots.

"Agreeable to you, Lansing?" he asked.

"Oh, quite, thanks. I expect it's getting late, and it doesn't look as if I could win a hand to-night."

"We'll have to give you your revenge some time," said one of the soldiers.

Lansing smiled, but said nothing. He won none of the five jack-pots, and when the accounts were added up had lost £84.

Mr. Prince did not dare to look into his face. What would the man say?

Whisky was produced, and they stood by the fireplace, and attempted to condole with the loser.

"And that reminds me," said Lansing suddenly. "I'll have to give you an I.O.U., if you don't mind. I've only got a tenner with me."

"Quite all right," said Sir Henry languidly, "but how about playing to-morrow again? You say you're not in London for long. I'm free to-morrow." He looked interrogatively round.

"Suits me very well," said Tom Lansing, and emptied his glass. "I may have better luck."

They agreed to play.

Mr. Prince felt as though he had committed a crime.

He spent an uncomfortable three hours the next morning. He could not rid himself of the idea that a sword was hanging over his head. It was impos-

sible to refuse to play again, and he had a premonition that the third game of cards would prove just as unfortunate as the others. Tom Lansing's luck would remain shockingly bad, and he himself would have been responsible.

He hung about the hotel, thoroughly upset. He thought of going to Major Farnham's office, but what was the use? His present visit to London had failed, and failed badly, and there was no more to be said. True, Bluemantle's victory and the £15 he had won at poker had rendered his loss at bridge negligible, but as for real business, it was, to use Ashley's phrase, a wash-out.

And it had really seemed as though Soames was somehow responsible. Ever since he had met the barrister, his luck had changed. Yet he liked the man, and his sleight-of-hand was superb. He smiled as he remembered that difficult "pass" which to Soames was so easy. It was really rather strange that the barrister did not go on the halls as a professional conjuror: he was certain to be a success. Why, he could perform marvels a foot in front of your nose, and you hadn't the smallest idea how they were done! In the old days, of course, he would have been a magician or an enchanter, and had a long beard, and worn a huge mantle. They might even have burnt him alive as a wizard.

"Oh, Lord," he sighed, "what utter rot I'm thinking. I wish——"

He stopped thinking, for a page-boy was coming up to him with a letter.

It is astonishing what a mere letter can do. This was quite a short letter, written in a Warwickshire manor-house. It told Mr. Prince little more than that its writer was returning to London rather earlier than she had expected. True, there was a very private message at the end, but it was just such a message as had appeared in most of the recent letters which this particular writer had been so regularly posting off. And yet a single reading of its untidy sentences instantly transformed Mr. Prince from the disgruntled and pessimistic financier with whom the gods were offended, into an enthusiastic superman who was assuredly destined to succeed.

Cards? What did they matter?

But, as it happened, they were to matter considerably that very day.

CHAPTER XIX

By nine o'clock that evening the five gentlemen who had agreed to play poker had foregathered in Sir Henry Ryde's room. The host himself was producing drinks. Mr. Prince was cracking jokes and endeavouring to obtain some enjoyment from a huge cigar. If Tom Lansing was nervous he did not show it. As before, he was the only one in morning clothes, and he was helping the two guardsmen to sort out the counters. Of these a small coloured one assumed a temporary value of threepence, a large white one was sixpence, a large coloured one was a shilling, a thin slab of mother-of-pearl was half a crown, and a "spade guinea" in brass was ten shillings. Five little piles were being built up. . . .

One game of poker is much like another. As before, the opening bets were modest enough. It was as though nobody wanted to be the first to buy a new lot of counters. Lansing, however, soon began to win small sums. The first jack-pot went to him. He lost half a dozen of his spade guineas on a bluff, but won the three following hands. The host's note-book was brought out, and Mr. Prince's name was the first to be entered: he seemed unable to hold any cards. Sir Henry himself was also losing, though the two guardsmen remained more or less "square." An unusually

protracted jack-pot went to the host, and then for the first time there was some really big betting, at the end of which Tom Lansing laid down four sixes on the table.

One of the subalterns uttered a sharp exclamation of annoyance. "I've a full-house aces up," he cried, "and yet I lose! Lansing, you're getting your own back all right to-night."

"It is a good thing I threw up my own hand," remarked Mr. Prince. "I held good cards, but was frightened out. It's the first piece of luck I've had to-night."

"Yes," said Tom Lansing. "I'm afraid you've taken my place as Jonah to-night."

"Can't be helped, old son," drawled the host. "Unlucky at cards——"

He stopped. Another hand was being dealt, the last hand, as it happened, to be dealt that evening.

Mr. Prince was the dealer. He picked up his cards, and frowned. Then he glanced quickly at Lansing who was sitting opposite, and saw that he was proposing to play the hand. Sir Henry retired, but the others came in. Cards were discarded and drawn. Tom Lansing and the others took three each, Mr. Prince helped himself to one. It was Lansing's turn to bet, but no bet was made. To the table's astonishment he threw down his cards.

"I refuse," said he, speaking quietly, "to play another hand."

"Good gracious, what's the matter?" Sir Henry

Ryde was staring at him with a puzzled frown on his face.

"I prefer not to say, but I must refuse to play."

The host had risen. "I don't know what the devil you mean," he said with dignity, "but if you suggest that one of us is cheating——"

Tom Lansing looked extremely uncomfortable. "I do suggest that."

Everyone rose up. For a moment there was silence. Then the host spoke in his ordinary tones.

"I don't know if you fellows agree with me," he said, "but it seems to me that if Mr. Lansing has a direct accusation to make, he had better make it at once."

Tom Lansing did not reply.

"You've got to substantiate the charge," observed one of the guardsmen, frowning.

"Well, sir?" Sir Henry was stern.

Tom Lansing brushed a hand over his hair. He moistened his lips. He glanced at each of the others, and then stood stiffly erect. And when he spoke he was looking at nobody.

"I hate having to say it," he said slowly, "but I accuse young Prince of changing the card he ought to have drawn for another."

They turned slowly round to look at Mr. Prince, who was nervously fingering his tie.

"Well?" demanded the host. "You've heard what Lansing has to say."

"It's—it's ridiculous!" Mr. Prince was looking at

his fingers. "I admit I've been losing, but as if I should——"

"Good God, man, I saw you!" Tom Lansing had swung round and was holding on to the lapels of the boy's coat. "Can you stand there and swear you didn't change the card?"

Mr. Prince looked helplessly at the others. It was quite true. He had changed the card, and by a cruel piece of luck, or, to be more correct, from lack of sufficient practice, he had been found out. Lansing must have had a sharper pair of eyes than he had expected. He could feel the man's hands shaking against his chest.

"I've made a fool of myself," he blurted out. "I'd better go." He gazed forlornly at his host. "If you don't mind paying Lansing what I owe him, I'll give you a cheque in the morning."

"But, look here, you can't——"

"There's nothing to say," growled the boy, and went out.

He walked slowly to his own room, turned on the light and sat down at a writing-desk. So the little experiment had failed badly; and there might be the devil to pay. Well, the thing couldn't be helped. He was angry with himself and angry with Gordon Soames, but there was no use in thinking of that lamentable display with the cards.

He began to write. . . .

He had not, however, written more than two or three words before there was a knock at the door. He

took no notice, and the knock was repeated. With a frown he laid down his pen, and called out. Tom Lansing came into the room.

"Mind if I interrupt you for a minute or two?"

"It's rather late," said Mr. Prince ungraciously.

"Yes, it is; but when a thing like this happens the hour doesn't matter. I expect you know why I've come."

"There was no need for you to come. I admitted what I had done, and I suppose you can do what you like."

"Yes, I caught you cheating," said Tom Lansing, and looked very intently at the boy. "Mind if I sit down?"

Mr. Prince shrugged his shoulders.

"It was not a very pleasant task to perform, and if I'd thought for a moment I should probably have said nothing at all at the time. As it was, of course, I had not the slightest idea that—— My lad, what on earth made you do such a thing?"

Mr. Prince's lower lip was sticking out in an obstinate way. "I've already made all the explanation I intend to."

"Oh no, you haven't. You can't expect people to let matters rest where they are. We've got to have this thing out, you know, here and now. I have played a good many games of cards in my life, and only once before has this sort of thing happened. It was at poker, too, and a card was changed. And it fell to my lot then to make the accusation. I didn't

want to, but it had to be done. And, honestly, I don't think I ever felt more uncomfortable in my life. But——" He paused for a moment. "But on that occasion the cheat was a rotter. He had been suspected for some time. In fact we'd agreed that if anything in the least suspicious was noticed by any one, I was to be given a signal—I was host, you see—and make my accusation. Well, my dear boy, it was a rotten business, and nearly stopped me from ever playing cards again. But there is one thing, Prince, that I learnt as a youngster, and have always continued to believe. When a man cheats at cards, I've always understood that he is endeavouring to help himself *but not his opponent!*"

Mr. Prince was playing with the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Yes, it was only after you had gone that I realized what that changed card had really meant to your hand. Of course at the moment I was absolutely thunderstruck. I couldn't believe my own eyes. It all seemed so utterly—wrong. We stood looking at one another, and I wondered when any of us was going to speak. And then I looked at your hand—you threw it down on the table—and they must have thought I was daft, because——Prince! If you hadn't changed that card, rather unskilfully, by the way—you would have won the hand. You deliberately got rid of a nine of spades which would have given you a straight flush. Those two soldiers were just going to chuck in their hands, and there was only myself against you. I can only suppose you wanted me to win. Well, my lad, I don't

quite see your game, and that's why I've come rushing round here without——"

"Look here," interrupted the boy, "I'd far rather say nothing about it. I've made a fool of myself, and there's nothing more to be said. I'm sorry."

"You certainly did make a fool of yourself, but I don't know whether it has occurred to you that you've also made a pretty good fool of me."

"You?"

"Why, of course! You don't imagine I can leave the hotel until I've put matters straight."

"The others'll put matters straight. Naturally I don't claim any of my winnings."

"Oh? Were you—er, cheating last night as well?"

"I was not."

"Then I don't quite see—— Prince, don't you think I deserve some slight explanation? I meet you in the City quite casually, and again the same evening here in the hotel. You ask me to dinner, and you introduce me to some good fellows, and then we play cards. And—suddenly,—this happens!"

There came a long pause.

"Well, if you want to know," said Mr. Prince at last, "it was a joke."

"A joke? A mighty poor joke, it seems to me."

"I mean, I'd been practising sleight-of-hand tricks, and I thought it wouldn't be noticed if——"

"Heaven help us, but you can't practise tricks when you're playing for high stakes! And that doesn't explain why you should be defrauding yourself."

"Oh, well, I thought you were losing enough."

"But—I was winning all the time!"

"Not as much as you lost last night."

Tom Lansing's eyebrows shot up. "What on earth has that got to do with it?"

Mr. Prince seemed too embarrassed to speak.

"You see, I—— My stars, Prince, you didn't think I shouldn't be able to pay, did you?"

"Oh, I suppose it has got to come out," cried the boy savagely. "I wish we'd none of us played. It was arranged beforehand; to-night's game, I mean. I told Henry Ryde you were out of a job and couldn't afford to lose much, and we agreed you'd had frightful bad luck; and Ryde, who's a jolly good sportsman, suggested we should somehow arrange for you to win back what you'd lost. He said it could be done if we took enough trouble. In fact he told me he'd actually seen it done in a man's rooms up at Cambridge. And then I had an idea, and I said I'd do it by sleight-of-hand, and," he added ruefully, "I bet him a sovereign I wouldn't be found out. We fixed it up this afternoon. I'm awfully sorry, but——"

To his intense surprise Tom Lansing was shouting with laughter.

"Out of a job, yes," he cried, "and the Lord knows what the old Doc will say when I get home. It'll mean the yacht can't be laid up as I wanted. But, my dear boy, you needn't worry about my finances. I've still got enough to live on, which is more than most other landlords can say these days. Why, it's priceless!"

He was laughing very boisterously.

"Your—yacht?" Mr. Prince was staring open-mouthed.

"The neatest little fifty-ton schooner you ever saw. With a Maudsley auxiliary and a patent bath of my own invention. Yes, I've had her for two years."

"Your *own* yacht?"

"Oh, my dear boy, don't think me rude, but I really can't help it. I shall go on laughing for an hour. Even with this supertax I can still keep up the yacht, and you can't do that with a biggish place in the country on your hands and four or five hunters and a car or two, to say nothing of the most extravagant wife, bless her, in the country, and a boy at Harrow, on nothing, you know. In fact most people will tell you I'm disgustingly rich and ought to be put out of my misery at once."

"But, I don't understand. You said—you said you wanted a ship."

"Didn't Pelly tell you? I thought he was certain to have told you. I'm always worrying his life out. Yes, I did want a ship, but I only go to sea for my health. Something wrong inside, and the rough life at sea does it good. But that's all. If you come up to Harlingham—that's my place—you can see things for yourself." He became suddenly serious. "But, look here, my boy," he went on, "we had better go back to the others. I shall have to explain. Don't look so frightened. I think you've behaved like a trump, and you'll have to tell me how I can show you my gratitude. I'm going to, you know. Come along, old man, and give me your hand."

CHAPTER XX

It was an unforgettable evening, although, afterwards, Mr. Prince could never be sure about all the details of its uproarious ending.

One thing, however, seemed clear. The barrister might have been right about the gods taking offence, but they must have forgiven him, for his good luck had unmistakably returned. His prowess at card-manipulation might be lamentably poor—he admitted quite candidly that it was—but by one of those pieces of good fortune which were almost becoming peculiar to himself, he had met the one rich man who did not seem to think that the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company was doomed to speedy extinction.

There could be no doubt about it. Luck had turned, and the evening was ending in the pleasantest way. Champagne had appeared from somewhere, and everybody was enjoying himself. By general consent the game of poker was deemed to have been finished, but as an additional penance for his blunder Mr. Prince was forced to exhibit all the card-tricks that he knew. They were not very skilfully performed, and Mr. Soames would not have been proud of his pupil, but that did not matter. Nothing mattered except that a certain young lady was returning to Chelsea tomorrow, and after luncheon Tom Lansing was going to interview Major Farnham.

And, after all, it did not appear that anybody had lost very much money. Tom Lansing might be a few pounds out of pocket, and Mr. Prince himself a little richer than he had been. The tragedy that he had been fearing had turned into a delightful comedy, and he drank his champagne, and was not in the least annoyed at the good-humoured chaff which he was forced to undergo.

Tom Lansing a rich man, a very rich man with a big place in the country and yachts and things! Hunted whenever he could! Who would have believed it!

And once, only a few days ago, he had almost decided that Sir Henry Ryde and his friends belonged to a gang of sharps!

He publicly admitted so much. It seemed the only thing to be done. "I've been the most awful fool," he told them, "and I owe you an apology. I got it into my head somehow that—er—it sounds absurd, I know—but I wasn't quite sure whether people at Mason's always played straight. I'd been seeing something of a man who used to be a member, and he gave me a wrong impression. I thought you ought to know, you see, because——"

His explanation was cut short. "Crooks!" cried one of the subalterns. "He thought us crooks! Us! Gentlemen of His Majesty's Household Brigade! What's to be done to such a scoundrel?"

"Obviously a court martial," said the other guardsman.

And hold a court martial they did then and there. It was rather a riotous court martial, and the prisoner

was allowed the unusual privilege of taking a glass of champagne with him into the dock. He was sentenced to be placed for twenty-four hours in the stocks —if they could be found.

After which Tom Lansing looked at his watch, and announced his intention of going to bed. He took Mr. Prince with him downstairs, and asked all sorts of questions about these financial affairs which were bringing him so frequently to London, and was let into the secret of that gold cup which had gone back to Turkey, and told of the mistakes that had been made with regard to Mr. Prince's identity, and informed about Mr. Waynflete and the little house in a side street.

And Tom Lansing chuckled to himself as he walked back to the attic which was all that his old nurse would allow him to have whenever he chose to put himself once again for a day or two under her capable wing.

"Lord," said he, as he got into bed, "what a joke!"

Henceforth Mr. Prince very definitely reverted to the keen man of business who was going to finish his career as a company director with yachts and cars of his own. For the next few weeks there were almost hourly meetings in the little office in Shepherd's Market. Tom Lansing had seen the Major, and gone very carefully into things, and approved of the Major's scheme for reorganization. And he turned out to be a man whose enthusiasm, once roused, knew no bounds. He sent for his clothes, he sent for his lawyers, finally he sent for his wife.

"I'm not going home," he announced, "until I've seen this thing through."

And he seemed to forget altogether the important fact that the state of his health was demanding a large and immediately dose of sea air.

There was a great deal to be done, and Mr. Prince had never been so hard-worked in his life. Yet he found time to relax occasionally in the neighbourhood of Chelsea.

It was important, he knew, to have relaxation. Billiards, for instance, and dancing.

And, as everybody would tell you, it was equally important to have somebody to whom you could relate everything that happened. A real pal, that was to say. A pal who understood things and made you forget your work at the right moments. Like Napoleon who would just fall asleep if he had a few minutes to spare. And Doris—well, he was really one of the lucky ones because Doris was so absolutely his sort. Not in the least like ordinary girls who couldn't take any interest in important affairs. And it was so ripping never to know what sort of dress she would be wearing or when she could slip out to lunch at that jolly little restaurant in Jermyn Street, where the head waiter always allowed you to have the same table.

It was so jolly, too, to be seen about with her. The Lansings, he knew, thought her extraordinarily pretty, and Mrs. Lansing, who had the most wonderful dresses, had asked her to stay up at Harlingham Hall. Mr. Soames was also greatly attracted, and showed her all his best tricks. And the Major was most

enormously struck. In fact the Major talked a great deal of nonsense, and occasionally Mr. Prince had to be very stern and severe, because the Major didn't seem to realize—well, that she couldn't be other people's pal as well as your own. . . .

Altogether it was a great time. A new company designed to amalgamate the business hitherto carried on by the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company with that of Mayfair Motors Limited, had to be formed. And company promotion was not easy. Mr. Prince, indeed, felt as though he had gone back to school. For at first he knew just nothing at all. The very terms which Mr. Soames used—the barrister, it seemed, was an authority on Company Law—held no meaning for him. A small portion, however, of that swollen banking-account was going to be invested in the new company, and he made it his business to master every detail. It was undeniably exciting. Here they were, four or five men sitting round a table, discussing figures and plans, and in a short while other garages and a much larger staff and more magnificent cars would be theirs. There were various important firms to be interviewed, and papers to be signed, and officers of the new company to be appointed. The Stock Exchange began to be more than a mere name to Mr. Prince, and all the while Tom Lansing seemed to be writing whatever cheques were required, as though the mere possession of a cheque book implied unlimited supplies in the bank.

The supreme moment came one day in November. A meeting was being held in Shepherd's Market, and

Mr. Soames begged leave to make an important statement.

"I have been making a careful and systematic examination of the Laws of England," he began, "and I can find nothing which will prevent our electing to the Board of the new company one who is an infant —if we wish to do so. True, once elected, I do not quite see how he could be held liable for anything short of bigamy or arson, but that cannot be helped." He turned to Mr. Prince. "In worldly affairs," he continued in his lugubrious way, "you may be the soured old gentleman with senile cunning and a mania for gambling that we believe you to be——"

There were signs of an impending struggle, but Tom Lansing managed to maintain order.

"——but, in the eyes of the Law, you are no more than an infant, a minnow, a sprat, or a shrimp. A thing of no account. A babe in long clothes. However, in spite of this unfortunate fact, and notwithstanding my own grave doubts as to the advisability——"

"What he really means of course," interrupted Major Farnham, "is that Prince becomes a director, and as we all decided that he should be a director months ago, I don't see the point of the statement."

"The Law——"

"Oh, damn the Law. Let's go to lunch."

"So it's really all right?" Tom Lansing looked very pleased. "Very well then, good luck to you, Prince. I think I've paid my little debt."

Mr. Prince felt his hands being shaken. . . .

A company director!

A successful man of business in receipt of a salary and dividends, with new responsibilities, and—perhaps most important of all—a desk of his own!

What more could you ask for at nineteen?

The next two months passed quietly enough. Mr. Prince left the Northumberland Hotel, and took a modest room in Half Moon Street. He allowed himself a few days' holiday with the Lansings at Harlingham Hall (where he had surprising adventures with the Midlandshire Hunt) and he dutifully spent Christmas in Bournsea. He worked hard with Farnham Automobiles Limited, and had the satisfaction of noting each week a marked increase in receipts. Incidentally he learnt the value of advertisement, and brought his usual cunning to bear on that branch of the business. The swollen banking-account, it is true, remained fairly stationary, but it did not actually decrease, and there was appreciable time for relaxation. His skill at billiards, indeed, rapidly improved, and his dancing earned encomiums even from those other young men who seemed to find in Miss Esmonde their ideal partner. There were theatres, too, and an occasional game of squash rackets with Gordon Soames at Queen's Club.

And yet—well, Mr. Prince did not disguise from himself the fact that he was becoming vaguely disappointed. The world still went on much the same, as though company directors were as common as dirt. And Farnham Automobiles Limited soon seemed to be running very smoothly of its own accord. It was

not a big company, and, apart from advertisements, there was not really very much scope for a fellow. Moreover, to do much the same thing every day, even though you were a director and not a bank-clerk, tended to become monotonous. The story-books and the cinema-dramas showed you company directors standing by the tape-machine and periodically issuing orders to secretaries and stenographers. Often in five minutes' time they doubled or even trebled their fortunes. They lived in a sort of whirlpool, and allowed you to see the thrill of really high finance. But in London, it seemed, nothing of a thrilling nature ever happened. You just saw that affairs were proceeding smoothly, and watched the motor-market.

Distinctly monotonous.

And was it really necessary for him to attend at the office every day? Very decidedly not. Tom Lansing had never come near the place, once the Company had been started, and yet Lansing was a director. Sir Henry Ryde looked in occasionally, but was he taking any active part now? No, he left things to the Major, who was Managing Director. Then would it not be possible to combine his directorship with—something else?

"You know," he told Doris one day, "I'm not at all sure that I'm cut out to be a business man. Not," he amended, "the ordinary business man."

"But I thought—why, you told me it was frightfully thrilling!"

"Ye-es. But not always. Not motors, for instance. Of course if I were a partner in a really big business

like Rothschilds or Wennigers, it would be different. They're always financing Governments, and influencing foreign politics. Ambassadors and people like that go to their offices, and their meetings are frightfully important. That sort of thing is thrilling, because sometimes the whole history of a nation depends on one man sitting in an office, but—motors!"

"But, Oliver, you're a director."

"I know, but somehow a director isn't quite what I expected. You can't do much on your own. And oh, you see, Doris, if you've been in the Navy, you want adventures and things of that kind. You don't want to know beforehand the sort of people you're going to meet. And then, in a motoring business the profits aren't really very large. I wish," he added, "something would happen. Something out of the ordinary. I'd like to rescue somebody, or find a treasure buried somewhere, or be a detective, or something."

"You *are* silly," was all that Miss Esmonde would say.

Mr. Prince shrugged his shoulders.

There were some things, it seemed, that *no* girl could understand.

As it happened, however, the Powers that Be were just then arranging to project Mr. Prince into yet another adventure.

CHAPTER XXI

A FEW days later he arrived, unexpectedly, in Bournsea.

A little holiday, he had come to the conclusion, was about due. In fact, if he were not to become stale, he *ought* to take a holiday. And where better than in Bournsea, which of late he had been inclined to neglect? It would be well to see Mr. Carstairs in person, and Mr. Waynflete would be wanting to know how Farnham Automobiles Limited was progressing. And there was his mother. Perhaps he had not been replying to her letters quite so regularly as was meet. Also, it was natural that he should want to see how Jane was getting on. At Christmas Jane had seemed to be a great success, but then at Christmas housemaids were always on their best behaviour. He ought to see how she was shaping at ordinary times. Certainly there were very good reasons for going to Bournsea.

In the train he reviewed his financial position. Well, it was satisfactory. In a few months' time he would know more or less what amount he could hope to be receiving annually from the Company, but even without that source of income, he was a man of some means. His fortune might not be large, but its foundations had been well laid, and that was the important thing. At the moment he was marking time.

Any question of marriage, for instance, belonged definitely to the future. Apart from the fact that he was rather young, marriage was expensive. Doris had money coming to her on her twenty-first birthday, but naturally that could not be taken into consideration. The wife of Oliver Prince should never be asked to keep herself. But it was only a matter of waiting.

"I shan't actually buy the ring," he decided, "for some time."

But it would be well to begin making preparations. In these affairs the further you looked forward, the safer your position became.

Once again he fell into an agreeable reverie which lasted until he caught a glimpse of the sea. . . .

And that evening he received a distinct shock. Jane, he found, was doing her work fairly well, but she privately complained to him of the house itself. He conducted an impartial examination, and found himself in the fullest agreement with the housemaid. The house was impossible. He could not understand how he had ever managed to live in it without repeated complaints. It was the rottenest house ever built. Nothing was right. The rooms were unhealthily small. And, as Jane said, they were wickedly dark. The water was never really hot, and there was no bathroom. The dining-room ceiling looked as if it might fall down at any moment, and some of the wall-papers had come away from the plaster and made ugly bulges. Also Jane was perfectly correct in saying that the roof leaked. It was extraordinary that he had not noticed all these obvious defects before. The

house was a disgrace, and the mother of a company director ought never to live in it. As for Mr. Waynflete, it was not fair to ask him to pay for his lodging.

Mr. Prince, moreover, experienced a slight sense of guilt. All this time he had been surrounded by luxury in London, while his mother had been forced to live in this—hovel! It was grossly unfair, and something would have to be done—something very drastic indeed.

The next day Mr. Prince walked out at an early hour, and did not return until late. He did not say where he had been, because so far his quest for another house had not been successful. There were many nice houses in Bournsea to be let or sold, but they were either iniquitously expensive or much too large. Two days later, however, an agent with whom he had become friendly sent him to see a little house on the outskirts of the town which might shortly be vacated. The present tenant, it seemed, was a rather eccentric old lady who owned a house of her own on the far side of Sandmouth, and she might be prepared to sell her lease—it had ten years to run—if she were approached in the right way.

Mr. Prince found the house, and was enchanted. It stood back from the road in a garden which even in its winter dress looked delightful. And its interior, as he was allowed to see after he had made himself agreeable to old Miss Jennings, was ideal. The rooms were much larger than you expected, and the bathroom might have belonged to a London hotel. Mr.

Prince had a long talk with Miss Jennings, and asked the price. There was a rent, he was told, of £40 and a premium of £200.

Mr. Prince thought the rent very moderate, but was doubtful about the premium. He frankly admitted that he was not sure of being able to find the money.

Miss Jennings beamed at him, and advised him to think it over. She didn't really mind, she said, whether she went back to her own house or not.

But—could he have an option for a little while?

Miss Jennings promised faithfully that for a period of four weeks nobody should be allowed to buy her lease except Mr. Prince, and they shook hands on the bargain.

There could be no doubt about it. Miss Jennings's house was the ideal place for his mother, who would love the garden and the clean white paint and distemper, and the cupboards, and the kitchen. Mr. Waynflete could have the large room with the balcony upstairs, and there was a little room next to the bathroom which would do for himself whenever he managed to snatch a few days' holiday in the future.

But—there was that premium of £200!

Mr. Prince walked slowly back to the disgraceful house in a side street. He could, of course, take £200 from that swollen banking-account, or at any rate a sum almost as much. And there were shares in his name which, if necessary, could be sold. But—was there no way of *earning* the money quickly and pleasantly in London? Surely the time was ripe for

another adventure? And yet, were he to return to London at once, he would probably find himself settling down in the Company's office again, doing dull things.

It was a difficult problem. He had quite made up his mind about the new house—was it not his clear duty to see that his mother, no longer so young as she had been, lived in a comfortable home?—but just how the transaction was to be effected, he did not know.

The Fates, however, continued to be more than usually kind. That evening while supper was being prepared, another telegram came, this time for Mr. Prince. It was from Mr. Esmonde who, it seemed, was very desirous of seeing Mr. Prince on the following morning, not, as might have been expected, in Chelsea, but at the Foreign Office. There was a private commission for Mr. Prince, if he cared to take it, which would brook no delay and would carry with it a respectable fee. Could he possibly return by an early train?

There was a pleasant sound about "a respectable fee." It could not be less than—what?—twenty-five guineas, and it might reach up almost to the amount for which Miss Jennings was asking. As for the private commission which would brook no delay, nothing could be more exciting. Returning to London, Mr. Prince imagined all kinds of heroic if impossible adventures. It was just possible that the Foreign Office had been told of his encounter with the German spy in the *King Henry*. At any rate Mr. Esmonde

knew all about it. Perhaps German spies were once again coming to England. Well, it would be delightful to tackle them. War of course was beastly, but it was far more exciting than peace, even though adventures did come your way now and then.

Another adventure! And that would probably mean that he would have no time to look after the interests of Farnham Automobiles Limited. It might even mean that his presence in London would have to remain secret. A *private* commission! And as Mr. Esmonde was a high official in a Government Office—— The possibilities were immense. He saw himself as a secret agent sent with all speed to America to put an end to the rum-runners. He saw himself careering across Europe in the rôle of King's Messenger, and being drugged somewhere near Milan by a beautiful woman who turned out to be the most dangerous anarchist ever born to throw bombs.

And by the time that he had reached the Foreign Office, he was finding it somewhat difficult to maintain that most necessary calm, without which, indeed, any show of devilish cunning was impossible.

He was kept in a waiting-room for a few minutes and then conducted to Mr. Esmonde.

They shook hands. Mr. Prince was waved into a chair by the desk, and Mr. Esmonde came at once to the point.

"Well, my boy," said he, "I'm glad you were able to come because I fancy you're just the fellow to investigate a matter which is giving some of us in the Foreign Office a little worry. There are plenty of

regular men whom I could have employed, but I wanted somebody whom nobody in governmental circles knows. The point is this: if you take on the job you will not be in any way an official agent, and you will have to do things in your own way. I want, you see, somebody absolutely independent at work, and it struck me you were just the man."

Mr. Prince endeavoured to show his appreciation.

"Yes, well, I think we understand one another. Of course you understand that anything I tell you is in absolute confidence. You will have to give me your whole time—well, nearly your whole time, for perhaps a fortnight or three weeks. Certainly not longer, I should say, and probably not so long. Officially I shall know nothing about you, and as far as the rest of the world is concerned, you will be in London on business connected with your motoring company."

"Yes, yes, I absolutely understand, Mr. Esmonde."

"And as regards remuneration"—Mr. Esmonde paused, smiling—"your expenses of course will be paid, and there will be a fee of fifty guineas.

Mr. Prince thought of that nice little house on the outskirts of Bournsea, and privately wondered if the fee could possibly be raised. Aloud, however, he expressed his satisfaction, and thankfully accepted the commission.

"Very well then, we'll get to business." Mr. Esmonde unlocked a drawer in his desk, and produced a bundle of papers. He glanced at one or two of them, frowned, and then smiled. "Ever heard of Styria?" he inquired.

"You mean that little place in the Balkans?"

"Yes. The only Balkan State which managed to keep neutral in the war. Rather an aloof place hitherto, but in the last two or three years—— Well, British opinion is not very well-informed about recent developments there." He shrugged his shoulders. "Probably there is no particular reason why it should be well-informed. On the other hand there is just a possibility of certain British interests being affected. I don't suppose it will be necessary for you to know much about Styrian politics, but you had better get the general hang of things, and I've got here a copy of Lord Umfreville's book on the country. Don't forget to take it away with you. *Styrian Days.* Quite an interesting book, and very well written. Yes, well, the old King of Styria is as cunning as they make them, and we are not at all certain what his latest game is. By rights he ought never to have been on the throne at all, but his father, Francis III., managed to get himself elected after the murder of his cousin in place of the present King of the Southern Slavs. There is, as it happens, both there and in this country, a party which wants to see Styria included in the new kingdom of the Southern Slavs. There is also an unknown quantity—the Crown Prince." He looked quizzically at the boy. "You see," he went on, "I'm trying to make sense of certain isolated bits of information which have been reaching us during the last few days."

"About the Crown Prince?"

"Yes. For an Heir Apparent in the Balkans the Crown Prince of Styria is a singularly retiring young

man. He has never figured in any scandal. And he is not one of those princelings who are constantly being photographed for the press. Practically nothing is known about him, but—well, two years ago he *was* in England for some reason we never properly discovered, and now in a roundabout way we have heard that he is coming again, in the strictest incognito, to London, either this week or next, and the long and the short of it is this. We want to know *why* this visit is being made, and if possible any results it may have. Our informant may be mistaken—he admits that he may have put two and two together to make five—but he tells us that a suite has been engaged for the Prince at the Royal Court Hotel in Mount Place. You probably don't know of the existence of this hotel. It is not very large, and it doesn't advertise. But it is very quiet and old-fashioned and discreet. There's generally some foreign Royalty staying there, but the public doesn't know, and the reporters are somehow kept out. Our American friends haven't discovered it, and probably never will. But it is an important hotel, as far as we are concerned. Our usual agents, however, are fairly well known there, and I want somebody who isn't known at all. You begin to understand? I want you to go to this hotel at once, and keep your eyes widely open."

"I see. You want me to shadow the Crown Prince?"

Mr. Esmonde smiled. "Not exactly. Shadow is hardly the right word. Sooner or later a man is bound to find out that he is being shadowed. No, I just want

you there in the hotel, taking any steps you consider judicious to find out the true state of affairs, but not undertaking any regular espionage. We have nothing against the Crown Prince. Nothing whatever. His visit may be one of mere pleasure—a little private spree. If so, well and good. You will earn your fee easily enough. But—we don't know. And as for yourself—register at the hotel under your own name, and if anybody is inquisitive about you, well, there is your grandfather to talk about. Sir Oswald probably knew of the Royal Court Hotel, even if he never stayed there. And some distinguished generals do leave large fortunes to their grandsons, don't they?"

It was now Mr. Prince's turn to smile. "Then for the time being," he said, "I shall not apparently be working for a living in London?"

"Exactly. You will be up from your ancestral estates, to attend a Board Meeting, let us say, of the Farnham Company. And of course for a little enjoyment as well."

There came a pause. Obviously this new adventure was going to be one after his own heart. "And about the Crown Prince," he asked. "Do you know what name he will take?"

"Not for certain. No, I'm afraid you'll have to find out that for yourself."

"I see. Can you give me any information about his appearance?"

"There's a photograph of him as a boy in Umfreville's book, and I've got somewhere—yes, here it is—a snapshot taken four years ago at a military review.

Unfortunately it is very poor, and as I was telling you, the Press agencies don't seem to have any. These papers here, by the way, won't help you very much, and in all probability the less you know about things beforehand, the better. I want a fresh mind altogether on the little problem. I don't doubt that you will be able to discover him quickly enough when and if he comes, but I don't want to give you a lot of detailed instructions which would probably be undergoing alterations all the time. Use your own judgment. So I suggest that you drive up to the hotel in the course of the day, and engage a good suite. You needn't worry too much about your expenses. The hotel is not cheap."

Mr. Prince grinned broadly. "I think I understand," said he.

"Good. Then here's some money to be going on with, and if you want more, ring me up. I'll give you my private number. Oh, and that daughter of mine wants to know whether you'll dine with us on Friday."

"Oh, I say, thanks most awfully, but—shan't I be—er, oughtn't I to be at the hotel?"

"Not necessarily. You can't always be in the hotel. That might look suspicious, if people became interested in you, as of course they might. No, just be your usual self. See any friends you like, and—have a good time." He held out his hand. "And good luck to you."

Mr. Prince looked very pleased. "It's ripping of you, Mr. Esmonde, to give me this chance."

"That's all right. I fancy you're to be trusted. But it is rather important, and I don't want you to do anything rash."

Mr. Prince nodded. "I think there are times," he said solemnly, "when I can be devilish cunning."

"I don't doubt it," laughed Mr. Esmonde, and brought the interview to an end.

So it happened that at five o'clock that afternoon the grandson of General Sir Oswald Prince, V.C., was once again on duty in his country's service.

CHAPTER XXII

After the Ritz and the Savoy the Royal Court seemed small and not very smart. The entrance was tiny, and, once inside, you were liable to lose your way, for there were winding passages and unexpected staircases, and suites of rooms squeezed in somehow between the regular floors. It was not like a London hotel at all. No orchestra played in the dining-room, and the servants did not appear in plush breeches and silk stockings and with their hair neatly whitened. Instead, as Mr. Prince noted with amusement, they wore a shabby blue livery which, at a casual glance, was not very different from naval uniform. Yet he could not have asked for a more comfortable suite than the one on the second floor that was given him. It was, he thought, the jolliest little flat, with its tiny hall, sitting-room, bedroom and bathroom. It was terrifically expensive, of course, and at this rate the £30 given him for expenses would not last very long, but, as Mr. Esmonde had said, on a government investigation of this kind, what did expenses matter?

He dressed for dinner, and made his way down to one of the public rooms. As yet he had not the least idea as to what course of action he should pursue, but was comfortably convinced that his good luck would as usual come to his aid. His preparations had been

meagre. He had skimmed through Lord Umfreville's book in his room in Half Moon Street, and decided that neither of the photographs would be of much assistance. The Royal youth, he considered, looked disappointingly ordinary, and the Royal inspector of troops looked like a thousand other men doing the same thing in a more or less gorgeous uniform. He had written his name in the visitors' book, and cast a hurried glance at the other names on the page, but they had not been helpful. Now he looked about him, but no one conformed in the least to his idea of a prince, Styrian or otherwise. A most ordinary-looking lot of people—on the dowdy side.

Well, there was no hurry. Mr. Esmonde expected him to be two or three weeks on his investigation. He could go very leisurely to work. . . .

Two ladies came in, and sat near him, and talked bridge in loud voices. A man with a short fair beard bade him good evening, and sat down at a desk. And then on a sudden the adventure jerked itself forward on familiar lines.

A young man in a dinner-jacket had strolled in and was glancing idly about him. He saw Mr. Prince, and stared. He hesitated for a moment, and then came up.

"Why, hallo, Oxney!" He held out his hand.

Mr. Prince smiled. "Sorry," he said, "but you've made the usual mistake. I'm supposed to be like Lord Oxney—I think I am—but my name is Oliver Prince. Oxney and I are friends, as it happens, but——"

"Oh!" The young man seemed taken aback.

"What a stupid mistake!" Then he laughed. "So you know him? I haven't seen him for some time, but you two really are extraordinarily alike. My name, by the way, is Ronald Armstrong." He took out his cigarette-case. "Staying here?" he asked casually.

"For a while," replied Mr. Prince, accepting a cigarette. "You too?"

"Yes. I generally stay here when I come to London." He was still looking curiously at Mr. Prince. "Wasn't Oxney greatly amused when he first met you?"

"I think he was. Funny how things happen, isn't it?"

"Funny things, I find, are always happening, wherever you go. Life's funny."

"Life," said Mr. Prince oracularly, "is jolly good fun."

"Yes," agreed the other, "if you've found the right girl to share it with you."

"That's what I meant."

"And if the right girl thinks you're the right man. Don't forget that little point."

"She wouldn't be the right girl," rejoined Mr. Prince, rather amused, "if she didn't do that." He smiled up at the ceiling as he leant back in his chair. He was wondering just then whether government secrets might be legitimately shared with daughters of high officials at the Foreign Office. Stupidly Mr. Esmonde had said nothing at all on that point. But Doris was certain to find out that he wasn't in Half

Moon Street, and she knew that her father had wired for him. On the other hand she might not know why he had been sent for. Well, he could tell her when his mission was over. . . . And how jolly it was to meet this man Armstrong: he seemed a very decent chap, the sort of fellow to make friends with very easily. "Yes," he continued, "if she doesn't make you her best pal, she's not the right girl."

"Pal?" repeated Armstrong, and looked doubtfully at him. "But you don't want only to be best pals. A man will do for your best pal."

"If she and you are not good pals," retorted Mr. Prince, and he spoke with the assurance of a much-married, middle-aged man, "you might just as well not marry at all. That's why people get divorced—because they don't remain pals after they're married."

Armstrong laughed. "I dare say you're right," he acknowledged, "though I've never looked at the question in that light before. But I don't agree with you about the right girl not being the right girl if she doesn't believe you're the right man. If you're really in love with her, she must remain the right girl."

Mr. Prince cocked his head. "That depends on what you mean by the word 'right.' Now it's my experience——" An old-fashioned gong sounded. "Hullo, dinner. I say, are you alone? Shall we dine together?"

"By all means. I want to hear more about your theories of love."

"Oh, I don't have any theories. Things of that sort just seem to happen. You find yourself getting

pally with a girl, and she becomes pally with you, and —er, all that sort of thing. But that's all."

"I expect," said Armstrong with a smile, "you're luckier than most of us. However, let's dine. And afterwards? I thought of going to the play."

"I should like to go, too," said Mr. Prince, rising up, "but I'm afraid——" He quickly sat down again. A tall, distinguished-looking, clean-shaved man in full evening dress had come into the room. His dark hair was brushed straight back from his forehead. He glanced round the room, sat down in a corner by the door, and lit a cigarette. And Mr. Prince stared.

"Know him?" asked Armstrong.

"No. Do you?"

"No. He's a Count Something-or-other, I heard a waiter say. Looks very pleased with himself, doesn't he? Well, shall we dine? If I am going to a theatre, I ought to feed soon."

"Righto," said Mr. Prince, and they walked out together.

At dinner Ronald Armstrong proved to be a most agreeable companion. Mr. Prince gathered that he had been at Harrow and Oxford, and that he had travelled abroad. And not altogether to his surprise he learnt that his new friend hoped shortly to be married. Absolutely the right girl for him, but—well, it was not all plain sailing. Women were curious creatures who did not always know their own minds. Mr. Prince agreed, but inclined to the belief that you had only to take no notice of their silly moods to win through. Armstrong wished that he could think so.

It must depend, he declared, on the girl. Mr. Prince argued that a man had to learn how each girl ought to be treated, but once such knowledge had been acquired, the rest was simple. In his own case. . . . Without altogether meaning to do so, he launched out into a detailed description of the multiple charms of an anonymous young lady who bore a strong resemblance to Miss Doris Esmonde. Whereupon Armstrong, not to be outdone, described another anonymous young lady whose horsemanship was as superb as her figure, and whose voice was as sweet as her lips. Mr. Prince agreed that she must be astonishingly beautiful, and the health of both ladies was drunk with all due solemnity.

As it happened, moreover, Mr. Prince was enabled, quite unexpectedly, to combine business with pleasure. After dinner a taxicab was ordered for Armstrong, and the two young men stood in the hall waiting for it. And then Armstrong casually mentioned the fact that he would be wanting a private car for a week or two, and sought Mr. Prince's advice.

"But how extraordinary!"

The other looked puzzled. "Why extraordinary?"

"Well, I'm—interested in cars. As a matter of fact I'm a director of Farnham Automobiles Limited. I expect you've heard of us. I can get you any sort of car you want, and most frightfully cheap. We can go round to the garage in the morning if you like. It's fairly close to the hotel."

"Thanks very much. Lucky I mentioned it. Well,

there's my cab. I'm sorry you can't come with me. See you to-morrow."

"As early as you like," said Mr. Prince, and walked up to his suite.

A good beginning, he thought. He was prepared to like Ronald Armstrong, who seemed a good sportsman. With, of course, plenty of money. At dinner champagne had been drunk—at his expense. And it certainly looked as though he would prove to be a good customer to the Company. He himself might have gone to the theatre, but perhaps it would be as well to begin taking his bearings at once. Already there were one or two little matters which would have to be investigated. But—on the whole, a very good beginning.

He remained for some time upstairs, but at ten o'clock walked down into the hall. He chatted for a while to the reception-clerk, and discussed the Irish situation and other matters with one of the porters. Then, as he was strolling into one of the public rooms a gorgeous lady in yellow dropped her bag almost at his feet. Mr. Prince picked it up, and was thanked very prettily in French. He pretended to understand what she was saying, and smiled and bowed. The lady was really very gorgeous indeed. He had another conversation with a porter, mostly about sport, and after a desultory voyage of exploration, found himself in the smoking-room. Here two men were playing chess, while a third watched the game. One of the players was the tall distinguished-looking man

he had seen before—his name, he had managed to discover, was Count Ostruc—and the other was small and fat, a globular person with sleek black hair and a waxed moustache. The man who was watching was the man with the short fair beard who had wished Mr. Prince good evening. All seemed engrossed in the game.

Mr. Prince ordered a whisky-and-soda, and sat down. He knew nothing about chess, but watched with interest. A difficult game, chess, he presumed. . . .

Ronald Armstrong, it seemed, was usually a late riser, but at ten-thirty the next morning he was taken to the garage where it was arranged that he should have the newest car, with a chauffeur, for a week on specially favourable terms.

Half an hour later Mr. Prince embarked upon his campaign. From a public telephone-box he spoke to Mr. Esmonde. At noon he was back in the hotel, carrying out a further investigation of its geographical peculiarities. He lunched alone, and observed with some interest that Count Ostruc and the lady whose bag he had picked up were sitting together at one of the corner tables. In the afternoon he played billiards with the marker, and while he was playing, the man with the short fair beard came in.

The marker seemed pleased to see him. "Afternoon, Mr. Merrill," said he. "I expected you in a little earlier. We've got a young champion here."

The bearded man nodded pleasantly, and in a few

minutes was applauding a delicate stroke which restored Mr. Prince's favourable position. And when the game was over, he suggested himself as an opponent. Mr. Prince agreed, and they played. The boy was just beaten, but he did not mind very much. Obviously Mr. Merrill was a much better player than himself, and he had played a thoroughly sporting game. Afterwards they watched two other players for a while. Mr. Merrill talked amusingly enough, but Mr. Prince was not sure that he liked him. He could not quite place the man. His clothes were what the boy privately termed "wrong," and there was a peculiar note in his voice. Not quite a gentleman, Mr. Prince decided. And then Mr. Merrill said something which forced all Mr. Prince's devilish cunning to the fore.

"I fancy I saw you last night with Mr. Armstrong."

"Yes."

"Known him for long?"

Mr. Prince hesitated for no more than a moment. "No," he replied casually. "I never saw him before yesterday in my life."

"I see." Mr. Merrill was slowly nodding his head. "Tried to borrow money from you yet?"

"No," said the boy, thinking hard.

"Well, it's none of my business, and you mustn't think it impertinent of me, but if I were you I shouldn't have much to do with that young man." He looked at his watch. "Hullo. Four o'clock. I must be off. You shall have your revenge some time." He smiled, said a few words to the marker, and went out.

"So that's that," muttered Mr. Prince, and for

a long time continued to watch the game. He saw, however, little enough of the play. . . .

From that moment he was exceedingly busy. He spent quite a long time in the post office round the corner in Mount Street, trying to get a trunk call. He saw Armstrong for a moment or two after dinner, and heard that the car had behaved exceedingly well. And, late at night, he lost his way in the hotel, and found himself on an iron stairway built on to the outside walls in case of fire. It was a warm night, and for some little time he enjoyed the view. Several windows were open, and he could hear people talking. . . .

The next morning he was at the post office telephone again but afterwards he did not leave the hotel until the evening. He played billiards with the marker for a while, and then it seemed that he was not the only one to lose his way in this singular hotel, for by chance he found Mr. Merrill, obviously at sea, on the wrong floor. Later on the lady with the bag took pity on his loneliness, and sat down beside him in the drawing-room. She spoke very poor English, but managed to make herself understood. An attractive woman, Mr. Prince thought, but perhaps rather inquisitive.

He dined in Chelsea, and temporarily forgot his commission. No awkward questions were asked, and for the time being Styria was wiped off the face of the map. He played one game of billiards, and then Doris produced a gramophone, and they danced by themselves in a small space at the far end of the room.

It was great fun, because you had to be so frightfully careful.

It was on the third day that Mr. Prince became definitely uneasy. He was conscious that something was *wrong,* and yet—what was it? What exactly was happening about him? What moreover, was he expecting to happen in the near future? There was something afoot, but what? He had managed to learn one or two curious facts, but what did they mean? And what had happened to Armstrong? They had breakfasted together, and, as before, Armstrong had spoken enthusiastically of his anonymous lady. Yet this morning—well, had there been some subtle difference in the man? Was he nervous? Was he keyed up in some curious way which suggested something imminent, something of unusual importance? Mr. Prince could not define his own thoughts. And was it his imagination, or were people really watching his own movements? More important, had somebody been into his suite while he was out?

"I don't like this place," he decided, and then cursed himself for a timorous infant.

That night he could not sleep. He had seen Armstrong after dinner, and found him greatly excited. His excitement, however, seemed natural, for it appeared that the anonymous lady had at last come to her senses. Mr. Prince had ventured to offer his congratulations, and indulged in a little philosophy with regard to the emotion of love. He had bowed to Count Ostruc, who was with the gorgeous lady, and gone early to bed. But sleep would not come, and

Mr. Prince tossed about, and listened to the gentle murmur of the traffic, and wondered whether he had been wise to accept Mr. Esmonde's commission.

How long he lay half-awake he did not know, but suddenly he sat up and listened intently. Traffic outside had now ceased, but there were queer muffled sounds close by him. He got out of bed, and put on a pair of trousers and his old naval greatcoat which served as a dressing-gown, and stood in the tiny hall by the door. Very cautiously he opened it, and peered out. At first he could see nothing at all. The corridor gave a turn a few yards to the left, and there was no light at his end. Gradually, however, he was able to distinguish the door of the opposite suite. A faint glow was coming from a light round the bend. And then he heard footsteps. He pulled the door nearly to, and caught a glimpse of Ronald Armstrong creeping by. Once again there were curious sounds. He opened the door an inch or two farther and listened. Somebody was whispering at the end of the passage. Somebody also was moving round the bend. Mr. Prince stepped out.

And suddenly a man rushed at him and thrust a small packet into his hands, and disappeared.

Instinctively Mr. Prince stepped back into the hall. For a moment he stood still. There were more footsteps, but the whispering had ceased.

Ten minutes later he had turned on the reading-lamp in his bedroom, and was examining the contents of the packet which had so mysteriously been put into his hands. It was a small wash-leather bag, and in-

side there was a pearl necklace, the clasp of which was in the form of a crown held aloft by a bear.

For a long time Mr. Prince stared at the necklace, and could not believe his own eyes. The pearls themselves were splendidly large, but he was more interested in the clasp. That bear with the crown—he had seen it before, in Lord Umfreville's book.

The Royal Arms of Styria.

CHAPTER XXIII

It is not given to all men to have a pearl necklace thrust thus unceremoniously into their hands in the middle of the night. When it does happen, it is advisable to do nothing in a hurry. It is not difficult to believe that a crime of some kind has been committed, even though that crime has not taken the exact course which the criminal had intended. It is necessary, however, to take some steps without too much delay. Even more important than the restoration of stolen property to its owner is the safe-guarding of oneself. It is not always easy to make an unimaginative policeman or even a scholarly magistrate believe your story.

For nearly an hour Mr. Prince sat on his bed, and thought very hard, and could not make up his mind what to do. Two points, however, had become clear. In the first place his plan of campaign would have to be changed, for it had not taken into consideration a necklace which so obviously belonged to the Crown Prince, and in the second place, he had not the smallest intention of allowing the thief, who had apparently blundered so stupidly, to retrieve his mistake. At the same time he had no desire to be taken to a police station with stolen property on his person. As soon as the loss of the necklace was discovered, there would probably be a high old rumpus in

the hotel, and the police might flock in and search every suite. And whatever happened, a government agent, even though he couldn't be officially acknowledged, must not be found with the pearls in his pocket. What to do?

In an ordinary case, he saw, there would be no difficulty at all. A stolen necklace came into your possession. You knew who the real owner was. Naturally you went straight to him, handed him back his property, and left him to take what steps he chose. But there were several excellent reasons why any such course was impossible, the chief one being that with thieves about the necklace might not be safe in its owner's possession. Therefore some exceptional plan must be evolved, and after a period of the most intense concentration, an exceptional plan—indeed a devilish cunning plan—suddenly presented itself to Mr. Prince's mind. He smiled happily to himself, and rose from the bed.

The plan demanded instant execution. Mr. Prince went to a desk in his sitting-room, and tied up the packet as neatly as he could. Then he put on a suit over his pyjamas and a muffler round his neck. For a while he listened, but all seemed quiet. He walked out into the corridor with the pearls in his pocket, and listened again. And now his explorations came in handy, for he knew that at the end of the passage there was a door which led to the servants' quarters. He found this door, silently opened it, and ran down the stone steps.

He reached the front hall, and after listening again,

darted past the reception-office, where a solitary oil-lamp was burning, hid the pearls where they were not likely to be found, turned back, and regained the stairs.

The plan, however, was by no means completed.

Once again out of the servants' quarters he did not immediately return to his own suite. Instead, he went boldly into Ronald Armstrong's rooms, and turned on the light, and gave that young man the surprise of his life.

At seven o'clock in the morning he was awakened from a confused dream, but not by the usual valet. The man with the short fair beard was standing by his bed.

"Er—hallo, what's that?" Mr. Prince was rubbing his eyes. "What's the time? Why, it's Mr. Merrill!"

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Prince, at this hour, but there's been a robbery in the hotel. A pearl necklace belonging to Count Ostruc has been stolen. I am Detective-Inspector Merrill of Scotland Yard."

"Good gracious!" cried Mr. Prince, becoming suddenly wide awake. "You a detective! Lord! And you say there's been a robbery? How awful! But what have I got to do with it?"

Inspector Merrill seemed embarrassed. "The Count seemed to think you know something about it."

"I? What an extraordinary thing! Why, the Count doesn't know me. We just bow, but that's all. I'm—I say, you know, Mr. Merrill, I'm not a thief."

"Quite so, but——"

"You're not going to arrest me, are you?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Prince. Count Ostruc is most anxious not to prosecute. He wishes the whole affair to be kept secret. In fact I have the strictest orders——"

"But look here, I haven't got the necklace. How could I possibly have the necklace? I didn't know anything about a pearl necklace—until this morning."

"The Count seemed to think——"

"Oh, damn the Count. I tell you, I haven't got the necklace, and I haven't the slightest idea where it is."

Inspector Merrill looked sharply at him, and when he spoke his voice had taken on a more official tone. "There is evidence to show that it is or has been in your possession."

Mr. Prince stared. "Evidence?" he repeated frowning. "What evidence?"

"And I'm afraid," continued his visitor, "it will be my duty to conduct a search in your rooms."

The frown slowly disappeared to give place to a smile, the smile changed into a grin, and the grin metamorphosed itself into a yawn. "Oh, you can search if you want to, but I'm awfully tired, and I do wish you would go away now, and come back later on, when I've had my tea. I have tea brought to me in bed, you know."

The Inspector was staring fixedly at him. "Don't you think it will save all unpleasantness if—well, what shall we say?—if you just tell us where the necklace is at this moment?"

"I've told you. I haven't the slightest idea where it is. Of course it *may* be in this room, but if it is, I can't think how it has got here. You'd better search, Inspector, or"—he suddenly sat up—"or I'll tell you what. Count Ostruc, you say, thinks I've had something to do with the theft. That means, I suppose, he practically accuses me of taking it. Well, the best thing will be for him to accuse me in person, and if you like, I'll come with you to him at once, and get the thing done with."

There was a little pause. The Inspector seemed doubtful. Then he abruptly walked out of the room. Mr. Prince could hear him whispering to someone in the little hall. In a minute or two he was back. "Very well," he said, "but you must excuse me if I remain here while you dress."

"Oh, certainly," smiled the boy. "Have a cigarette."

Fifteen minutes later he was following the Inspector to a suite on the floor below. Here, in a sitting-room, were standing two men—the fat little man with the waxed moustache and a thin dark man whom he vaguely remembered to have seen somewhere before. They had obviously dressed very quickly.

"Mr. Prince——" began Merrill.

"Ah, yes." The fat little man bowed. "He wishes, I understand, to speak to us in private. Perhaps you would not mind waiting outside, Inspector, for a few minutes."

The Inspector went out.

"Now, Mr. Prince, please sit down. This is a very unfortunate and mysterious affair. I gather that you

wish to see Count Ostruc, but please let me say at once that he does not accuse you of being the thief. No. I beg you will not think that. But it seems that the real thief—and we know who he is—in his hurry to escape detection, handed over the necklace to you."

"But how do you know all this? Were you there?"

The fat little man smiled. "No," he replied, "but this robbery was not altogether unexpected. Inspector Merrill has been on duty with his assistants all night. The thief himself has not——"

He stopped. An inner door had opened, and Count Ostruc, as usual beautifully dressed, came into the room. He bowed to Mr. Prince. "Ah," said he, "it is kind of you to come to us in our trouble. I appreciate the awkward position in which some wretch of a thief has placed you. Have no fear at all. The matter shall go no further. Our good friend Merrill is clever, but—he was too abrupt? You distrusted him? You prefer to hand over the necklace to its owner?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Prince.

"Excellent." The Count was smiling. "And I need hardly say how grateful to you I shall be." He held out his hand.

"Oh, but you see, I'm afraid I can't——"

The Count was still smiling. "I see what you are thinking. You have examined that clasp. You have seen the Royal Arms. Well, I must let you into my little secret, I suppose. Here I am known as Count Ostruc, and that is the name by which I desire you to

continue to know me, but it is not my real name. I am," he finished simply, "the Crown Prince of Styria."

The man with the waxed moustache made an absurd little bow. The thin man stepped back a pace and straightened himself.

If Mr. Prince was astonished, he did not show it. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but if you were the King of England himself, I couldn't give you the necklace. It isn't in the hotel."

Count Ostruc's demeanour altered. His figure stiffened. There was a frown on his forehead. "Explain, please," he said sternly.

"Well, you see, I thought the necklace might be stolen again, so I took measures to get rid of it."

"You know where it is?" demanded the fat little man with obvious eagerness.

"I've already told the Insp——"

The door opened, and a man peered in. Mr. Prince turned to see Merrill sign negatively to the Count.

"Oh, no," the boy continued, "it isn't in my rooms. It isn't in the hotel at all. I keep on telling everybody that, though they don't seem to believe me. And isn't it breakfast time? I'm most fearfully hungry. I really shouldn't worry about the necklace," he added, addressing the man with the waxed moustache. "It's sure to be returned to the Crown Prince sooner or later, and as long as he doesn't believe me to be the thief——"

Then, instinctively, he braced himself, for the thin man was creeping round to his left, and the fat little

man was fumbling in his pocket. Count Ostruc, however, waved them back. "Perhaps," he said softly, "it is a question of a reward for your trouble, Mr. Prince?"

The boy cocked his head. Miss Jennings, he was thinking, was a very pleasant old lady, but she certainly knew the value of money. "D'you think I ought to have a reward?" he asked doubtfully.

The Count smiled again. "'My secretary shall pay you £500 on receipt of the necklace."

"Oh, in that case," replied Mr. Prince smiling too, "I might reconsider my position. But I can't get the necklace at the minute. Would this afternoon suit you?"

"Where have you hidden it?"

"Oh, it's quite safe, but I can't lay my hands on it at the moment. You see, I didn't think there would be a reward offered for its recovery, and then——"

"Mr. Prince, I don't understand you. You refuse to restore stolen property to its owner until you are paid. You refuse to say what you have done with the necklace. Very well, you understand your position? You have already admitted that the necklace has been in your possession——"

"Unless I dreamt it," interrupted the boy. "It was a very odd business to happen in the middle of the night in an expensive hotel like this."

"That may be, but in the presence of witnesses, you have made certain important admissions. I make no direct accusation, but——" he paused significantly, "you will forgive me if I point out to you that it will

be Inspector Merrill's duty to watch your movements until——"

"Oh, *rather!* I shan't mind that a bit as long as he doesn't actually arrest me. I suppose that would be shadowing, wouldn't it? It must be rather interesting to be a detective," he chuckled. "Five hundred pounds! What a lucky thing for me that the silly thief made such a mistake! He must have taken my old naval coat for the hotel livery. Yes, I used to be in the Navy, you know. Probably that's why I woke up when I heard the thief prowling about. But of course I know who he was—you do, too, don't you?—and so it doesn't much matter, does it? Well, shall we say three o'clock here for the necklace? That would suit me very well. And could I be paid in notes? British notes, of course, because the Exchange is so funny these days, isn't it? I mean, you never quite know how much a note is worth, unless it's in dollars or pounds. And even pounds sometimes don't make up quite so many dollars as they—— But I mustn't keep you any longer, and I dare say it'll take me a little time to get hold of the necklace again." He looked round the room. Then he bowed very formally to the Count, smiled very sweetly, and went out.

In the passage Inspector Merrill stood waiting. Near to him was the lady who had tried to be friendly.

"Oh, Inspector," said Mr. Prince, "you're to watch my movements. Shadow me, you know. So I'd better tell you what I'm going to do. I'm first going to telephone to some friends of mine from the post office box round the corner. Much better to use the

post office box, because I dare say they listen to what you're saying in the hotel. And then I'm going to eat a colossal breakfast. And I'm going to have cream with my porridge. And then I suppose I shall have to get that necklace for you. It was clever of you to know that I'd had something to do with it. But then, of course, you've got to be clever, haven't you, or they'd never make you an Inspector, would they? Not a Scotland Yard Inspector, I mean. And we must have another game of billiards to celebrate the recovery of the necklace. We might play after tea to-day if that's convenient. Or will you have to go back to the Yard?"

And then, because the Inspector did not seem to be enjoying this little speech, Mr. Prince dodged suddenly backwards, and ran downstairs.

CHAPTER XXIV

YES, they were watching him, and it was the greatest possible fun. And in a few minutes' time Mr. Esmonde would have come to the hotel, and more inspectors, and he would be having the time of his life.

He helped himself to more marmalade. Really, there was something to be said for these secret government jobs. They might not make your fortune for you, but they were undeniably exciting. In fact it might be worth considering the advisability of asking for some permanent job under the Foreign Office: as King's Messenger or something like that. Mr. Esmonde could probably get it for him. And yet—could you hope to live in a large house with a beautifully-dressed wife who gave dinner-parties, and a marble bathroom and footmen, on mere adventures? You could not. A pity, but there it was. Fifty guineas for three days' work was good enough pay, but then he was not an official agent. If the Government employed you regularly, your pay was miserably small, and you had to wait years for promotion. True, you might be serving your country, but you could also serve your country in a financier's office, and in that case you might be helping yourself at the same time.

All the same, it had been a jolly little adventure, and its conclusion might be particularly thrilling. It

might be, but, to say truth, Mr. Prince did not think that it would. The big thrill had come and gone. That had been when for a whole hour he had played with a Royal necklace which was worth anything up to fifty thousand pounds. And he could have got away with it! Yes, he could have slipped out of the hotel, and walked round to Half Moon Street, and let himself into his rooms there. And instead of being shadowed this morning in the Royal Court Hotel, he could have caught a train to the South Coast, and crossed the Channel and——

A gentleman, he was told, was waiting to see him.

He drank up his coffee, and went into the hall.

"Well, my boy," said Mr. Esmonde, "this is all very extraordinary. I've done what you asked, though I don't understand what has happened. You say the whole——"

"Come upstairs," interrupted the boy; "we're being watched here."

"The devil we are!"

"Oh yes, and it's the greatest fun, but I don't want those fellows to hear what we're saying. Come along, Mr. Esmonde. I've got lots to tell you, and I've found out all you wanted to know."

They walked upstairs. "Now," said Mr. Esmonde, sitting down on a sofa in the second-floor suite, "you can explain matters. I take it the Crown Prince has arrived and been mixed up in——"

"The Crown Prince," said Mr. Prince, " is a good fellow. I like him. He's a little mad, but then he's in love. That's why he's here, by the way."

"You mean——"

"Oh, very badly in love, Mr. Esmonde. I found that out at once. He can't think of anything else, and I don't know what would have happened if—— You see, I met him almost as soon as I arrived. In fact he took me for Oxney, and we had dinner together. He didn't tell me he was the Crown Prince—he called himself Ronald Armstrong—but he did tell me he'd been to Harrow and Oxford, and, if you remember, Lord Umfreville mentions the Prince's English education. I didn't suspect who he was at first, but we began talking about girls, and he became most frightfully excited, and then it slipped out he'd come to England —not London, Mr. Esmonde, but England—to see one particular girl. And then, I don't know, I became a little suspicious, because he never spoke about his people or said what his profession was or what part of the country he came from or anything, and he talked French to the waiters—well, not like an Englishman talks it, and—there were other little things which I pieced together. You do piece things together, you know, if you've been in the Navy. And I made certain by telephoning to Oxney. He didn't know anybody called Ronald Armstrong, but he did know the Crown Prince of Styria who, two years ago, wanted to marry a sort of cousin of his."

"Not Lady Angela Melton?" cried Mr. Esmonde.

Mr. Prince looked disappointed. "You knew, then?"

"The merest rumour which nobody believed. Go on, my dear boy, you interest me enormously."

"Well, they're definitely engaged now, and they're going to be married almost at once. She lives somewhere in Kent, and he has motored there every day in one of our cars. When he came here two years ago she refused him because she didn't want to be a sort of toy queen. No hunting, you know, or anything of that kind. And the most frightfully strict etiquette or whatever they call it. I don't blame her. But now—— Well, I've found out what's really going to happen in Styria. I found out at three o'clock this morning. The old king's going to abdicate, and Styria's going to be swallowed up by that other place whose name I can never remember. Slav something. . . . The Prince explained the whole situation. I simply made him. Of course I told him why I was in the hotel. I had to do that, and I thought it didn't matter very much, because he's never going back. In fact I suppose he won't be a Crown Prince any longer, but—just whatever he likes to call himself. And that reminds me. Armstrong was a real person, an old friend of his who was killed in the war. And it's not a very uncommon name, so he took it. He was turning out an old drawer, he told me, when he found one of Armstrong's letters, and that gave him the idea. Yes, he told me all these things at three o'clock this morning. I'd gone to his rooms, you see, to blow him up. Such a fool, you know, to carry a valuable necklace about like that!"

"Yes, but, my dear boy, this is just the one part of your story that I don't understand in the least. You talked of a gang who were after the Prince, and

I gather a necklace of his was stolen last night, and that you were able to give it him back. Then why——"

"Oh no, Mr. Esmonde, I haven't given it back. You see, I haven't got it to give. It'll all very amusing, because I've been offered a reward of £500. Yes, really! A frightfully lot of money, isn't it? And the gang—well, that was what made me want to shake him. He knew about the gang all right, but he thought they were only out to knife him. Political assassination and all that. Apparently in Styria they're always trying to knife you, and you get quite accustomed to it. At any rate the Prince seemed to think it was quite usual even in a London hotel. And he wouldn't believe me when I told him the gang didn't care a twopenny cuss about politics. Why, he didn't even know he'd been robbed! And you should have seen his face when I told him what had happened, and he found the pearls gone from his case. You see, that necklace is a sort of symbol in his family. They put it round their brides' necks in the church. Which explains why he hasn't given it to Lady Angela yet. That was what I was trying to explain to you on the telephone, but I expect I was a bit hurried, because you see——"

"Yes, but this gang, as you call them. How did you find out their existence?"

"Oh, the gang." Mr. Prince was looking at the crease in his trousers. "They're not very clever, these international crooks, are they? I expect they've never been taught how to be really cunning. Otherwise I

don't understand how they come to make such silly mistakes. Of course I guessed pretty soon that something was wrong, because after Merrill had warned me against Armstrong—the Crown Prince, I mean—I heard him talking to this Count Ostruc fellow and one of the servants here. They didn't know I was on the iron staircase outside their room, but I was, and I heard a good deal. I didn't quite get the whole hang of what they were talking about, but I did begin to understand why they didn't want me to get friendly with the Prince. They thought, you see, I might interfere with their plans. Unwittingly of course. I didn't know *what* they wanted to get out of him, but I knew it was something, and—oh, then I got busy, you know, and hung about the place a bit, and picked up clues, and I found that the hotel servant for whom I'd been mistaken had once been the Prince's valet, and been sacked. And then, you know, what do they go and do but actually hand over the necklace to me!"

"But how exactly did it happen?"

"Well, we're not quite sure, but we think two of them must have hidden in his rooms, hoping to get the necklace while he was asleep; but one of them must have been clumsy, and the Prince woke up. I was awakened too. His suite is near to this one, and I must have seen him just after he had rushed out with a revolver. I suppose they heard his coming, and thought I was Bessier, the ex-valet, who's head of the gang, by the way, and—there you are. And then, if you please, they try this colossal bluff! Of course I'd been wondering what they would do. I felt pretty

certain they'd find out who had been given the necklace, but I didn't know how they'd try to get it from me. Rather cute, don't you think, what they did?"

"But, my dear boy, I'm in a fog."

"Well, of course they didn't know I'd been in the Navy. They thought I was just the ordinary sort of fellow who had met the Prince casually and took him for the man he pretended to be. So they tried to overawe me. Merrill pretended to be an inspector, and the Ostruc man made a beautiful stage prince, and they all bowed and scraped, and I nearly told them—I don't know what I didn't nearly tell them. It was rather good fun, you know, just as though I'd been engaged to act for the films. I'd never believed that such things really happened,[1] but then I expect when you're dealing with Royalty, all sorts of peculiar things happen as a matter of course. A regular international gang, that's what they are. Besides Merrill and Ostruc, there's a little fellow with a beastly moustache, and the ex-valet, and another thin fellow, and the woman who tried to find out all about me. I told her a lovely story, by the way. Still, it was cute, you know. They couldn't know what I knew, and I might so easily have given the necklace up when he said he was the Crown Prince. I mean, if I hadn't got pally with the real Prince. It's luck, of course, Mr. Esmonde." He laughed quietly to himself. "D' you think they still believe I'm going to produce the necklace this afternoon? I wonder! Five hundred pounds! And the joke of the thing is this. When

[1] Nor had the author.

Armstrong—the Prince, I mean—and I were pow-wowing together this morning, he said he wanted to reward me. It's a very valuable necklace, you see, and I wondered how much——"

"But where *is* the necklace?"

"In the post," replied Mr. Prince smiling. "I happened to notice there was an early collection from the box in the hall. So I wrapped up the necklace in an envelope and addressed it to you, and slipped down and posted it. I went down the back way, because I was pretty certain they'd be watching for me, if I tried to get out of the hotel. I couldn't register the packet, of course, but I thought it was worth taking the risk. You do take risks if——"

"Yes, yes." Mr. Esmonde was looking anxious. "I think you were fully justified, but we'd better have immediate inquiries made. I'll get on to the post office. You'd better come with me perhaps."

"And miss the real police, Mr. Esmonde? I telephoned to Scotland Yard, by the way. In your name. Thought it sounded better, coming from you. And I can't possibly come until I've woken the Prince up. He sleeps most frightfully late in the mornings. I expect they all do in Styria."

CHAPTER XXV

It was very curious. Mr. Prince could not understand it. In fact he was almost forced to the conclusion that on occasions international crooks could be cunning.

The police came with all speed to the Royal Court Hotel, but to little purpose. Count Ostruc, it seemed, had been suddenly and most unexpectedly called to Rome. He had left with his secretary and valet. The lady with the bag had also gone. As for Merrill he could not be found, not even in the billiard-room. Oddly enough, too, one of the hotel porters was missing—a new man, as it happened, with excellent credentials.

So there were to be no further thrills. Well, he had not really expected that there would be. And yet it was a little disappointing. It would have been such fun to go into the witness-box, and tell the Court about his exciting adventures. The reporters would have flocked about him, and his photograph would have been in all the papers. They would certainly have mentioned his grandfather, and he might have become almost as well-known as the old boy himself. For naturally the whole world would want to be told about the necklace and the Crown Prince's love affair. It was additionally vexing inasmuch as in all probabil-

ity Farnham Automobiles Limited would have obtained a splendid advertisement for nothing.

And then Mr. Prince became a little ashamed of himself. It was a quite legitimate ambition of his to become as famous as his grandfather, but this ambition would have to be achieved through some worthier channel than a police court case. Besides, there was the Prince to be considered. He would not want all his private affairs to be dragged into the glare of publicity. Mr. Esmonde, too, would not want it known that he was in any way implicated. No, it might all be rather disappointing, but perhaps it was just as well that the gang had escaped. Sooner or later they would probably be caught. And in any case he had earned his fee in a very short time, and at a surprisingly small cost. The Prince, moreover, had as good as promised him a reward. Now, indeed, that he realized what had occurred, the Prince was exceedingly grateful, and wanted him to meet Lady Angela, and proposed to give Mr. Esmonde all the information that the Foreign Office desired to have.

So it was in a fairly cheerful mood that Mr. Prince gave up his suite at the Royal Court Hotel, and drove with Mr. Esmonde to Chelsea. It had been amusing to talk to high police officials, even though the thieves had escaped, and he was able to give them what he was assured was most valuable information, particularly about Merrill who, it seemed, was the only Englishman in the gang. The pearls, moreover, duly arrived.

That evening, too, there was a little dinner-party

at the Esmondes' house to celebrate the occasion. For some time beforehand Aunt Mabel had been in a state of the greatest agitation. But then she was very seldom asked to play hostess to Royalty. The Crown Prince, however, soon put the old lady at her ease, and when he had gone, she announced her intention of buying a new dress for his wedding. The evening, she considered, had been a great success. Mr. Prince fully agreed with her, for never before had Doris shown herself so unmistakably to be the right girl.

At a late hour they were in the billiard-room by themselves. Mr. Prince had told her the whole story of the necklace, and was now endeavouring to show her a particularly difficult cannon which Merrill had brought off during their game.

"He must have been very good," said the girl. "I wish I'd been there to see him and the others. You do have exciting adventures, you know."

"I think I do," he agreed, "but——" He hesitated. Dressing for dinner this evening, he had found himself slightly worried. As yet he did not know exactly what sum would be forthcoming from this particular adventure, but even if a reward came from the Prince handsome enough to pay that premium in Bournsea, he was not sure that he would be completely satisfied. He had refused to be a bank-clerk in order to make his fortune, and that fortune was slowly coming this way, but—he could hardly hope for a regular series of profitable adventures lasting his lifetime, and what else was there? A directorship which really meant nothing but ordinary office-work. Was

there then no way in which he could combine steady profit and adventure? A sort of business which was not to be dull routine? "You know, Doris," he said now, "I'm most frightfully grateful to your father, but I've been thinking. It's jolly being a government agent, and getting necklaces and things, but—I don't think I'd like to be always doing that kind of thing."

"No? Well, what do you want to do?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

"But you must have some sort of idea in your head."

He looked at her. "Yes, I have," he said. "I want to have a flat in Mount Street, and a house in the country. A large flat and a little house. I think I've got the house, as a matter of fact, just outside Bournsea, but that, you see, is for my mother. The flat, I suppose, will have to wait. Mount Street's very expensive."

"But why a large flat?"

"Well, naturally it would have to be a large flat, because I'd be married."

"Oh! But you can't marry at nineteen."

"I *could*," said Mr. Prince, "but I thought of postponing it till I'm twenty-one."

There came a pause. The girl was apparently interested in the nap of the cloth. "I wonder what sort of girl you'll marry," she casually remarked.

Mr. Prince assumed his most judicial air. "I think," he said, "she'd have brown hair with bits of gold in it, and she'd dress well, and—we'd be the most frightful pals. And she'd know just how the flat ought to be furnished, and be able to dance. And I

think she'd like being kissed, although sometimes she'd pretend she didn't."

"I dare say there're lots of girls like that."

Mr. Prince was not so sure. "You see," he said, "there's only one right girl for a fellow." He put down his cue, and faced her. "I say, Doris, would *you* like to live in Mount Street?"

She appeared to consider the matter. "I might like it," she admitted.

He had taken hold of her arms, and at that particular moment the exact method whereby a flat in Mount Street was to become more than an agreeable dream, did not seem to matter at all. For all he cared, the Prince's necklace might be the last of his adventures. "Doris," he whispered, "we'll always be pals, shan't we? I mean, the sort of pals who'd go on being pals, whatever happened?"

Presumably the answer was in the affirmative, for when Mr. Esmonde came into the room a few minutes later, his entrance was not at first noticed. Indeed he found it necessary to cough.

The gang had escaped, but there was one further thrill.

In a week's time a letter came to Half Moon Street.

"You may have wondered," it ran, "that I have not until now given you a tangible expression of my gratitude, but there were difficulties in my way. My own fortune is not yet in England, and I did not know what form my thanks might best take. My family now knows of my determination to remain in this

country, and money is arriving. And on asking our good friend Esmonde what he thought would be the best kind of present, he made a definite suggestion which I am only too delighted to follow. Will you therefore please me and my future wife by accepting the enclosed, with our warmest thanks."

And Mr. Prince opened a cheque for £500. . . .

A month later Miss Jennings retired to her own house on the far side of Sandmouth, and Mrs. Prince was in a state of excitement such as baffles all description whatsoever. About the same time the reporters were converging upon a small village church in Kent, to report the Royal wedding. Most of them mentioned amongst the principal guests two gentlemen who bore a singular resemblance to one another. One of these was a cousin of the bride's, the other was a grandson of the late Sir Oswald Prince, V.C., whose services to the Empire would not easily be forgotten.

CHAPTER XXVI

Two months passed; not an unpleasant two months on the whole, although not wildly exciting. It was jolly buying things for the new house, and it was jolly to have your own stock-broker. Also it was good fun to be sleeping half the week in London and half down at Bournsea. In London Mr. Prince attended Board Meetings, and played billiards in Chelsea. At home he took pleasure in converting his own little room into something resembling a ship's cabin, and conducted a regular correspondence with the young lady who at some future date was proposing to live in Mount Street. Incidentally he had purchased so many new suits of clothes that Mrs. Prince became frightened.

And he had seen something of his new friends. He had driven over to Oxney Towers, and he had lunched at Kirkaldy House—that huge square pile at the top of Curzon Street. Tom Lansing, who was shortly off on a voyage to Australia, had sent him some excellent game. Once or twice, too, he had dined with Gordon Soames, and been taken to the Magic Circle, which is a privilege not accorded to everybody.

Yes, a pleasant enough time, but—not altogether satisfactory. He was enjoying no new adventure, and the banking-account, although still large enough to

earn Mr. Carstairs's respect, remained stationary. Also, it was impossible not to see that Mr. Waynflete did not approve of the present state of affairs. He kept hinting, indeed, that Mr. Prince was not making the most of his time.

Well, there was something in what the old boy was saying, and Mr. Prince took a sudden decision. He went to London as usual on the Tuesday morning, but instead of going to Half Moon Street, he was driven to the Carlton Hotel. The Carlton, he thought, might very well provide him with a new adventure. American millionaires, foreign noblemen, world-famous travellers, jockeys and other unusual people stayed at the Carlton. Surely an adventure would be forthcoming?

Apparently it wouldn't.

For three or four days Mr. Prince allowed himself to be as extravagant as was possible. He came to know various people who seemed charmed with his company. But anything in the nature of an adventure obstinately refused to present itself, and he returned to Bournsea at the end of the week in a rather poor temper.

Three weeks later the position had become impossible. He almost dreaded a meal because Mr. Waynflete's questions had now become so pointed. And even old Carstairs had begun putting blunt inquiries about his future. Moreover, Doris had taken it into her head to ask awkward questions. Something would have to be done. Something very big and definite and lasting. But what?

Mr. Prince took a walk into Bournsea. He stood for a while outside the little house in a side street, and smiled to himself, and then walked on to the quay. And there, with his legs dangling as usual over the edge, he endeavoured to review his position. What was he going to make of his life? To what uses was he going to put that devilish cunning of his? What exactly did he *want* to do?

Well, one thing was clear. Ever since he had left the Navy, he had determined to become a financial magnate. He would have to go into high finance, but into the sort of high finance which did not mean the merest routine. Something quite different from Farnham Automobiles Limited. And it suddenly struck him that although he had managed to meet all kinds of people, he had never—with a possible exception in the case of Mr. Welkenberg—met anybody who was really in the front rank of financiers. Somehow, then, he must meet one of them, impress him with his own devilish cunning, and become permanently attached to his staff. "In Rothschilds," he thought to himself. That was the sort of thing he would like to be able to say if somebody asked him what he was doing. Yes, but these magnates were notoriously difficult to approach. Probably people were trying to get money out of them all the time. Obviously, however, he must meet one of them, and trust to his luck. People liked him, didn't they? Very well, why shouldn't the magnates like him?

He sat on the quay for more than an hour, and then suddenly rose up. That same evening he was

in London, and at an early hour on the following morning he was hard at work. He interviewed a number of acquaintances and friends. He telephoned to various parts of the country. He lunched in Chelsea, and managed to squeeze in a short game of billiards with Doris (to whom he explained that he was now looking for a permanent job), but at four o'clock he was hard at work again, and only broke off for a very late dinner. Wisely, however, he refused to work late at night, and treated himself to a stall at the Eastern Ballet, in which the incomparable Tarakovna was just then delighting all London.

Two mornings later, armed with a letter from the Duke of Kirkaldy, he was driven to the City. He had received many letters of introduction to the heads of great commercial houses, and after much thought had decided to open his campaign with the one which, in the event of success, would probably lead to the most enviable position. The Duke had warmly recommended him to Sir William Wenniger, who was popularly supposed to be one of the richest and most powerful commercial magnates in Europe.

Wennigers, indeed, was a name to conjure with. Mr. Prince knew that Wennigers financed foreign governments. They had agents all over the world. Sir William himself was an almost mythical personage who shrank from all publicity, and was never seen in society. Well, with Wennigers at your back——

His cab stopped in front of a large grey building in Fenchurch Street. He passed into a lofty hall, and looked doubtfully about him. A commissionaire

asked him his business, and on hearing that he wished to see Sir William Wennigir, inquired at what hour his appointment might be. On learning that there was no appointment he seemed almost shocked.

"Sir William sees no one without an appointment."

Mr. Prince produced his letter of introduction. "Kindly have this letter from the Duke of Kirkaldy handed at once to Sir William."

The commissionaire lost a little of his shock, but still looked doubtful. Mr. Prince merely smiled—as one who has given an order and is prepared for its immediate execution—and sat down. He waited and watched. A little group of top-hatted men stood talking close by him. People were coming and going, and there was a steady stream of telegraph boys. From a room somewhere near came the click of typewriters. On a table by his side was a file of the *Financial Times*.

A quarter of an hour passed, and then a young man very beautifully dressed was borne down in the lift and came up to him. "Mr. Prince?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Oh—er, I'm sorry to say Sir William is very particularly engaged at the moment. If you were to write for an appointment——"

"Has Sir William himself seen the letter I brought?"

The question was unexpected, and the young man looked uncomfortable. "Er—you see, Prince Grebizoff is with him at the moment. Mr. Latrobe, however, is Sir William's—er, entirely in his confidence. You see——"

"I'm afraid I don't see," said Mr. Prince smiling.

"That letter was marked 'Personal.' If Mr. Latrobe opened it——"

"But he opens all the letters."

Mr. Prince stared, and found himself wondering how this particular young man had obtained a position in Wennigers. "Is Mr. Latrobe engaged too?"

"Er, I'm afraid he is. You see, it's a very busy time just now. If you were to write——"

"Impossible," said Mr. Prince, still valiantly smiling. "My business is urgent. Will you please ask Mr. Latrobe to see me."

The young man seemed unwilling to do anything of the kind, but there was something about Mr. Prince's smile—it was a threatening, quarter-deck sort of smile—that caused him to think better of it. "If you'll wait a minute," he said, "I'll see if he can spare you a moment, but, honestly, I'm doubtful. He's been up to his ears these last few days."

"I shan't keep him for more than five minutes."

"Right. But—could you tell me what you want to see him about? It's so unusual, you know. Is it anything to do with a—a job? Because I'm afraid——"

"Just tell him, please, that I wish to see him for five minutes on important business."

The young man looked rather hard at him, and then without speaking again walked away. Ten minutes later Mr. Prince was being conducted to a small room on the first floor. Here he was left alone for such a long time that he had almost decided to explore for himself when a bell rang, and he was taken into a

large office with a thick pile carpet, where a sallow-faced man was writing at a desk. "Mr. Latrobe," whispered his guide, and left him.

"Good morning," said Mr. Prince.

The man at the desk grunted, and continued to write. He did not even look up. Mr. Prince stared at him with disapproval. If this was high finance, he thought, bank-clerking might be preferable.

"Oh—er, Mr. Prince?"

"Yes," said the boy coolly, "and I fancy you have opened a personal letter to Sir William Wenniger, which strikes me as being irregular."

Mr. Latrobe put down his pen and stared. "It is customary——" he began, and stopped. Surely this was a mere boy. "My apologies," he said sarcastically, and Mr. Prince immediately hated him, "but the number of people who wish to see Sir William and whom Sir William does not wish to see, is legion. As it happens, I am in his fullest confidence, and have his permission to open all his letters. So I hope—— However," he continued, altering his tones—his visitor was not so greatly impressed as he ought to have been—"I gather from this letter that you are seeking some kind of—er, post. But in what precise capacity——"

"I'm afraid," interrupted Mr. Prince, "my business is with Sir William Wenniger."

For a moment Mr. Latrobe looked keenly at the boy. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "In that case," he remarked, "there is no need for me to keep you any

longer. If you will write in the usual way for an appointment——"

He stopped. A door had opened, and a little tired-looking man in shabby clothes was peering in. "Oh, Latrobe, I want that copy of the draft you have." He looked quickly at Mr. Prince. "A new face?" he said with a slight smile. "And what does our young friend want?"

"Sir William Wenniger?"

"Yes, my boy, what is it?"

"Mr.—er, Mr. Prince brought a letter," interposed Mr. Latrobe, "from the Duke of Kirkaldy, and wished to see you. I was just explaining——"

"One Prince after another," chuckled the old gentleman. "Grebizoff has just gone. All right. You shall come along—for five minutes. Bring your letter."

There followed an interview which Mr. Prince did not easily forget. In Latrobe's room Sir William had seemed to him to be a courteous old gentleman with a sense of fun, but in his own bare office he appeared in a very different light. He read through the Duke's letter, and frowned. Then he stared at the boy, and frowned again. "How old?" he demanded abruptly.

"Twenty."

"H'm. And what can you do? Shorthand? Typing? Book-keeping?"

"I rather thought that would be a clerk's work."

Sir William's eyebrows rose up. "So it would,"

he agreed a little grimly. "Did you expect to begin at the top?"

"No, but I'm not looking for a clerk's job."

"Then what *are* you looking for?"

Mr. Prince endeavoured to explain. He had rehearsed his reply to just such a question a dozen times, but there was something so hard and aloof about this shabby old man sitting huddled at his desk that words did not come too easily. He knew, he said, a number of rich people. He was keen, and particularly interested in questions of finance. In various ways he had already made money which had been advantageously invested. More important, he had played a not inconsiderable part in the formation of Farnham Automobiles Limited, of which Sir William had no doubt heard. And of this Company he was a director. Which meant, of course, that a clerk's job, or indeed anything like it, was out of the question. And then he had been in the Navy, which helped a man far more than most people supposed. He believed he could be of assistance to a man in Sir William's position if——

He was stopped. Sir William had been listening in silence, but suddenly he held out the paper which Latrobe had handed him a few minutes before. "Read that," he ordered. "No, wait a minute. You know French?"

"Not very well."

"German? Russian? Italian? Spanish? Arabic?" Each word was uttered in a louder voice.

Mr. Prince was obliged to admit that he had not

yet learnt these languages. A naval career hardly allowed a man——

"Then read that."

Mr. Prince obeyed.

"Yes, well, what is your opinion?"

The boy's nerve seemed likely to desert him. In point of fact he understood little of the document. "My opinion?" he repeated uneasily.

"That's what I asked for," barked the old gentleman. "Well, what does it say? Eh? Eh?"

"Er—your firm," hazarded Mr. Prince, clearing his throat, "agrees to finance an—an undertaking in Persia. It will pay Prince Grebizoff £10,000 on account for his commission from the Persian Government. An oil-field——"

"Yes, well, shall we be justified in paying that price?"

"I—I don't know, but I could find out if——"

"Find out!" roared Sir William, suddenly angry, "I want people who *know*. Do you know this Prince Grebizoff? Of course you don't. Do you know who the Nizam Dullah is he speaks of? Or the Ispahan Hills? Or in what relation we stand to the Foreign Office? Or what special steps we should have to take to form the Company? Bah! Don't interrupt me. This twopenny halfpenny motoring company of yours —has that anything to do with international law? Does the Government step in and demand to be told every time it buys a new car? Or puts in an extra telephone-box? Are the French Jews putting spies

in your garages? Don't interrupt. You know nothing at all. And yet just because you come to me with a letter from a duke, I'm expected to take you into my office, and pay you a salary! It's ridiculous. Now listen. It probably isn't your fault, and I'll give you a word of advice. If you want to make money—big money—you must do what I did, what Latrobe has done, what everybody who has made a success in business has done: you must begin at the bottom. What possible use can a boy like yourself be to me? I showed you that draft just to prove it. It's complicated, I admit, but it's the man who has drawn it up who is of value to me. I want a man like Latrobe on whom I can absolutely depend. How, for instance, do I know that Prince Grebizoff's concession is valid? How do I know the exact standpoint the Foreign Office will adopt towards us? I know these things because I have a man in the next room—Latrobe—who for years has been studying affairs in the East. I pay him a large salary because he's worth it to me. Why will you find the Earl of Gledstones upstairs, also in receipt of a large salary? Not because he's an earl. Not because a duke gives him a letter of introduction. Not because he's brought money into the firm. Oh dear no. But because Gledstones is about the greatest authority in the world on the South American Republics. In my business I need experts. But you—have you any special knowledge to put at my disposal when I want? Of course you haven't, unless it be something to do with motor-cars. In

which case I've got my own chauffeur. Don't interrupt. It takes long years to obtain the sort of knowledge which is of value to Wennigers. And yet you expect me—— Go home, my boy, and advertise in the usual way for a clerk's job. And don't waste the time of busy men like myself. Good morning!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Mr. Prince spent that afternoon in his own rooms. He was ashamed and angry and helpless. He, an ex-officer, the grandson of General Sir Oswald Prince, V.C., a director of Farnham Automobiles Limited, a man with money invested in various industrial undertakings, to be treated in this way! And by whom? By a miserable, wizened old man who probably spent his leisure in counting his beastly money. A rotten, miserly fellow. A brute who had only succeeded in building up a huge business by bribing people who really understood high finance to work for him. And a beast who had bought a title from some wretched government which only cared about getting the money for its own party. There was not a single redeeming feature about the man. Mr. Prince, indeed, wanted to take Sir William Wenniger forcibly to a desert island and leave him there to starve. And if it was an island with no fresh water, so much the better.

But there was also Latrobe—a loathsome fellow with the manners of a hyena. Mr. Prince felt the greatest desire to imprison Latrobe in the darkest and dampest and most rat-ridden dungeon in the Tower of London for the rest of his life. He hated Latrobe. He would cheerfully have watched Latrobe being

minced into small pieces. Latrobe was an evil-faced viper.

Yes, he loathed Wennigers and everything and everybody connected with the firm, including the beautifully-dressed young man and the commissionaire. Nothing should ever induce him to move a finger on their behalf. "I'd like to boil them in their own beastly oil," he muttered, and paced miserably up and down the room.

It was lamentable, all the more lamentable because there seemed no possible way of getting his own back. The Duke should certainly be told, but what could the Duke do? Naturally he knew nothing about the real character of the man to whom he had written. Armed with that legitimate letter Mr. Prince had gone to Wennigers, and been treated like a small boy, and told to become a clerk! It was an insult, and the sort of insult which nobody who had served afloat and unmasked a German spy could be expected to swallow. And yet how could the insult be avenged? He had never been so humiliated in his life. Wasting busy men's time! That was what that rheumatic old beast had said. And how was anybody supposed to know about those Persian dagoes and their beastly hills? And the Farnham Company a twopenny halfpenny concern!

"Maddening!" said Mr. Prince, and looked about him for something to smash.

There was nothing to smash, and the boy dashed out into Piccadilly in a temper. He glared angrily at everybody who looked in any way like a financial mag-

nate, and when he came to Berkeley Square, he stopped outside a thin house on the eastern side, and had considerable difficulty in restraining himself from throwing stones at its windows. The beastliest house: it belonged to Sir William Wenniger. Probably there were scores of powdered footmen inside and marble bathrooms and all sorts of luxuries. A foul house which ought to be burnt. By what right——

A policeman was looking at him with mild interest, and he passed on. Throwing stones, he saw, even if every window in the house were to be smashed, would do no good.

And then, barely two hours later, chance, as so often before, came to his aid. . . .

That evening he was dining with the Esmondes, and during dinner did his best to hide his chagrin. He admitted that so far he had not signed an agreement with any of the great financial houses, but hazarded a guess—perhaps a rash guess in the circumstances—that in the near future affairs would turn out very well for him. Then, when Doris and her aunt had retired, and the two gentlemen were enjoying a night-cap, words came from his host's lips which caused Mr. Prince to sit up in the greatest excitement.

"You look rather tired," Mr. Esmonde was saying from the depths of his chair, "and is it my fancy, or are you angry about something? I've seen you look quite bloodthirstily about you at moments this evening. Well, I hope you're not feeling as bloodthirsty as I am."

"You, Mr. Esmonde? But you don't look it. I

admit I've had rather a rotten day, and I hoped it hadn't shown. But you—you really feel bloodthirsty?"

"I do," replied his host. "I feel minded to curse every man jack of them. If I had my way, they should all be boiled in their own rotten oil. Then I might perhaps enjoy a little peace for a change."

"Boiled in their own oil!" cried the boy. "Why, how extraordinary! That's exactly what I've been saying to myself for the last six hours."

Mr. Esmonde looked sharply at him. "You haven't been investing your money in any oil concern, have you?"

"Oh no. But why do you want them to boil too? I never imagined anybody else would hate them as much as I do."

His host looked slightly puzzled. "I think we must be talking at cross purposes. Who do you mean by them?"

Mr. Prince was about to relate his unfortunate experiences of the morning when he decided that no good could come of their relation. "I was thinking of a particular firm, which deals in oil."

Mr. Esmonde laughed. "A very different matter. I had in mind certain high and mighty brass hats at the War Office. However, don't worry about my bloodthirstiness. It'll probably wear off very soon. It's a long story about oil which wouldn't interest you in the least."

"But it probably would, Mr. Esmonde. I'm—I want to hear all about oil. There's money in oil."

"Money! D'you think I don't know it? Of course there is money, if you happen to be some oil-magnate like Lord Bowker or Wenniger or somebody of that kind, but not if you're a hardworking civil-servant who ought to have been pensioned off years ago. Oliver, why the devil aren't you an oil-magnate? I could do you a good turn if you were."

Mr. Prince stared. "If you did me a good turn," said he, "I might become one."

The other laughed. "I've no business to be talking shop," he said, "but I suppose you'll see the funny side of things if I tell you. Of course it's only another of the usual inter-departmental squabbles. We're all supposed to be as jealous as cats of one another, and I dare say we occasionally are. And hard things are said. You can't wonder at it. When a whole lot of extra work is suddenly thrown on to your shoulders not on account of any mistake you've made, but because another department chooses to play the goat, you do feel inclined to let yourself go. I admit I've usually got on extremely well with the brass hats. If you treat them in the right way, they're generally lambs. But it does sometimes happen—— Well, listen. What happens with this infernal oil that they want? The brass hats suddenly decide that they must have an oil-field of their own, somewhere in Asia. Therefore will the kind Foreign Office please see to things at once. That sort of thing is constantly happening. Various chits pass, and we set our machinery in motion. We make all sorts of inquiries, and find that the Persian Government has just the thing. The Persian Govern-

ment will be pleased to give us a concession to work a field near the Ispahan Hills, about which——"

"The what?" Mr. Prince's excitement was increasing.

"The Ispahan Hills," repeated Mr. Esmonde, "about which our agents have been making reports on and off for the last five years. All quite simple, you see. And then when the kind Foreign Office is just about to inform the dearly beloved brass hats that all their work has been done very nicely for them, there comes just about the nastiest complication you could think of. Once upon a time, you see, there was a Russian nobleman, and this Russian nobleman obtained a concession to work this particular oil-field from a former Prime Minister of Persia. We knew all about this concession, of course, and for a very simple reason took no notice of it. It didn't happen to be valid." He paused for a moment, and looked at Mr. Prince. "Bored with my little tale of woe? No, well then, I'll explain why the concession wasn't valid. It was never ratified by the Assembly, or Parliament, at Teheran. All quite simple. But what do we hear? Cipher cables immediately begin to flow in from Washington of all places. What on earth has Washington to do with it? Well, we learn that this Russian nobleman, whose name is mud, has apparently got a powerful American syndicate behind him. The American syndicate believes his concession to be valid. Then the fun begins. We cannot just tell the syndicate that it is mistaken. That would never do, because Anglo-American relations are delicate. No, we have to be-

gin a curious campaign aimed to show that although the American syndicate has every international law on its side, it will be well-devised, financially speaking, to back out. Not at all an easy business, my boy, and for the last two months I have been moving heaven and earth to get the Yanks to retire. It nearly killed me, but I did it. That was last week. And I was just congratulating myself on completing the whole business when the Treasury steps in and is extremely grieved to find that owing to some blunder in the accounts or estimates or something else equally revolting, they are obliged to turn down the War Office scheme altogether. And there," he finished, "we are. That's all I get for working twenty-four hours a day for weeks. We've got our concession, and we're not allowed to make use of it."

A queer little throb seemed to be passing through Mr. Prince's body. "But you could sell it, couldn't you, to somebody?"

"Oh, the Foreign Office doesn't sell these things by auction. I wish it did. No, I suppose I shall have to let the various big houses know that it's going, and worry myself silly, and have all the oil-magnates turning my nice quiet room into a bear-house. You see, we're only concerned for British prestige. I expect Lord Bowker's group or Wennigers will handle the thing. For myself, I'd prefer Wennigers, but—— My dear Oliver," he broke off, "what on earth is the matter?"

The boy had risen from his chair, and was staring

at him. "Is the Russian nobleman you mentioned by any chance a Prince Grebizoff?"

"Yes," replied his host, rather surprised. "Why, d'you know him?"

"No, but I know something of him. And you say he's got a concession which isn't valid?"

"I dare say he thinks it's valid, and I dare say he'd fight the case in any courts but our own, if he got the chance. But after my negotiations with the American group——"

"Grebizoff," interrupted the boy, "is in London. He's selling his concession to Wennigers. I've seen the draft agreement."

"Selling to Wennigers!" Mr. Esmonde was sitting up erect. "But are you sure? I must see them to-morrow."

"Why?" demanded Mr. Prince. "Surely it's their own look out if they buy a dud concession?"

"Oh no. Wennigers is a first-rate firm. We should have to stand by them. But I can't understand—— No, no, Oliver, you must have made a mistake. That fellow Latrobe knows about as much as we do ourselves. He'd never allow himself to be taken in for a moment."

Mr. Prince was thinking hard as he shook his head. No, he maintained, there was no mistake. As it happened, he had been consulted in the matter by Sir William Wenniger himself.

Mr. Esmonde stared.

"Yes," continued the boy, wondering whether it was

incumbent upon him to explain the exact nature of the consulation. "I'm afraid Wennigers are in for trouble." He looked at the ceiling as a daring Idea came into his head. "I suppose you couldn't keep this concession—your concession, I mean—secret for a few days, or allow me to try to raise a syndicate to take it over? I mean, of course, one that would satisfy the Foreign Office, and—and——"

"My dear boy!"

"Oh, I know it sounds ridiculous, but, you see, I do know something about the matter and this Russian Prince, and I think I could save you a lot of trouble, Mr. Esmonde, if you were to let me fix things for you. I can't quite explain at the moment, but there is a particular reason why Wennigers mustn't have your concession. I mean——" He broke off to whistle, and for a little while seemed to forget where he was. And Mr. Esmonde watched this mysterious youngster whose affairs seemed so frequently to be mixed up with his own. "I should want just a week," finished the boy, and smiled.

"But, Oliver, the Foreign Office doesn't——"

"I want to tell you my scheme," interrupted Mr. Prince, and proceeded to do so at considerable length. . . .

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTERWARDS he decided that he had never experienced such an extraordinary week.

He was not, it is true, very happy at first. It was obvious, for instance, that Mr. Esmonde did not look on his scheme with wholehearted approval, and the utmost persuasion was necessary before he had agreed to say nothing to Wennigers for a week. He seemed to think that because the draft agreement between Wennigers and the Russian had been discovered by accident, any knowledge of its existence ought not to be used to the firm's disadvantage, wholly failing to realize the gross insults to which he, Oliver Prince, had been subjected. For of course it had been necessary to explain in part that miserable hour spent in Fenchurch Street. Moreover, Mr. Esmonde could not be made to see the desirability of his future son-in-law —and was not such a relationship a practical certainty?—really becoming an oil-magnate. Instead, he talked of irregular proceedings, and more trouble with the Treasury, and the necessity for the strictest commercial integrity.

"Which," as Mr. Prince himself explained to Doris, "is absurd, because of course I shouldn't dream of being dishonest."

"No," agreed the girl, "but you are rather mysterious, you know: I mean, when you've got one of your schemes on. It's awfully difficult—well, just to sit still and wait till they're all over."

"I don't think I am, you know," replied the boy. "Cunning perhaps, but not really mysterious. And yet I don't know," he added judicially. "Perhaps I *am* a tiny bit, at times. But then, you see, high finance, really *high* finance, the kind when you're dealing with millions and governments and things of that sort—well, that kind of finance *is* a mysterious thing. It's got to be, or you'd have all sorts of people trying to interfere and making the most fearful mess. It's the same thing, you see," he continued, warming to his subject, "in diplomacy. Ambassadors and Consuls and King's Messengers must be mysterious, or there'd be the most frightful rows in the various Parliaments, and I dare say there'd be a good deal of killing, too. Assassinations and vendettas and things. You see what I mean, don't you? You've got to work so much in the dark. Why, Doris, suppose I were to tell you what I've been doing to-day. Well, I don't say anything terrible would happen, because we're pals who can trust one another, but suppose someone had seen me come into the house—a French Jew or—or somebody of that sort, and suppose he'd crept in somehow, and heard what I said! Well, you see, don't you?"

"But how could the French Jew get into *our* house?" asked the practical Doris. "We've got burglar alarms."

"I didn't say he would: I said he might. Or he

might have bribed one of the servants to listen outside the door."

"Bribe Emily!" cried the girl indignantly.

"Silly, I'm only trying to explain why I have to seem a little mysterious at times. But if you wait a week," he went on, "I expect to have something most frightfully exciting to tell you."

He was certainly very busy just then. The great scheme, he had discovered soon enough, had to undergo certain important alterations. Company promotion, when it meant hundreds of thousands of pounds was no easy task, even if you had several rich people to help you and a Foreign Office not unwilling to back you. And not even his work with Farnham Automobiles Limited had made things any easier. With the motoring company it had been merely a matter of finding a few thousand pounds and arranging to buy up a rival concern. Now, however, he was being called on to deal in almost unthinkably large sums, and, in addition everything had to be done in the utmost secrecy. Actually there were important people who would have given large sums of money just to know what he, Oliver Prince, was doing! It was jolly to know that, of course, but on the other hand the knowledge that huge issues were involved was rather worrying. It was like being at sea again in war-time: you had to be on an almost continuous watch, and never knew from one moment to the next what was going to happen. And there were so many difficult matters to investigate, matters, some of them, which you would never have supposed could have anything to do with

high finance. . . . It all meant late hours, and visits to people who asked all sorts of awkward questions, and telephone calls at all hours of the day, and the writing of dozens of letters. Mr. Prince decided that he would engage the services of a lady stenographer as soon as he had wiped out the Wenniger insult. He would choose a pretty girl for the job, though not too great a beauty, because in that case Doris might be jealous. You had to be careful when you were dealing with more than one girl. But he would certainly have somebody young and jolly like——

"Like Mabel," he muttered, and smiled rather roguishly.

Mabel! A new friend, almost a pal. And about the queerest pal you could have. A secret pal, of course, and rather—stimulating. Curious how he had come to know her so well. Mabel What-was-her-name? Stokes, was it? Or Stork? He was never quite sure. To him she was just Mabel, one of those jolly little girls who assisted at the Eastern ballet. Yes, he had become very interested in the Eastern ballet, and decided to see as much of it as he possibly could. He had made Mabel's acquaintance on his second visit, at the stage door, when he had boldly introduced himself and declared his intention of taking her out then and there to supper. She had called him a "caution," but had not been able to refuse the invitation. And they had fast become friends. Indeed, almost every evening during this extraordinary week Mr. Prince might have been seen watching the brilliant

Tarakovna dance and, at a later hour, escorting one or other of her assistants to supper.

Well, of course some relaxation was necessary, and what more natural than to take a pretty dancer out to supper?

These girls from the theatre, moreover, were exceedingly good fun: not clever, and certainly not Eastern, but highly amusing. They had all sorts of quaint stories to tell. Mr. Prince was never tired of listening to their chatter. He liked to give them supper too. Mabel sometimes seemed to prefer him not to invite her colleagues as well as herself, but—well, you had to be wary. These girls might be jolly, but if you made the slightest mistake, they might do the most dreadful things, not even stopping short of an action for breach of promise. He remembered the Honourable Lavery Doune and his Phyllis. She must have led him the most awful dance. . . . But there was no reason why you shouldn't be pals, and even apart from Mabel and the others, there was a mysterious attraction about the theatre itself, particularly after you had been taken "behind." In fact there came moments when Mr. Prince wondered whether he might not have missed his vocation. There seemed to be continual excitement in the life of an actor. And as for Mabel, well, for all her cockneyisms and the silly things she did to her face and hair even when she wasn't inside the theatre, Mabel was rather a dear. She expected you to kiss her—and to say truth Mr. Prince had kissed her more than once—but why not? The ordinary

rules didn't quite apply to girls on the stage. Besides, his kisses were more or less paternal. They went, as it were, naturally with the chocolates.

Unfortunately not all Mr. Prince's various transactions that week remained the dead secret that he desired them to be, and there came a moment when it almost appeared likely that his theatrical adventures might lead to trouble. For it happened that a kind friend of Miss Esmonde's reported to her the interesting fact that that nice Mr. Prince had been supping on the previous evening with an obviously improper chorus girl. As a result there was a short passage of arms.

"Still very busy?" asked Doris, when Mr. Prince came to Chelsea for a well-earned cup of tea. She had dressed herself very daintily in what Mr. Prince called a party-frock, but he knew at once that something was wrong.

"Rather," said he. "I don't know how I found time to slip around here for tea."

"No, it must be very difficult for you." She was pouring out tea with an air which she hoped was that proper to a slightly bored hostess. "I suppose you get no time for—er, dancing or theatres?"

He looked at her. "I have been to the ballet once or twice," he told her, frowning.

"Oh, really? I rather thought of asking father to take me one night."

"Why don't you? You'd like it."

"Probably not as much as you seem to do," drawled Doris, and wondered whether she would be any good

at an artificial yawn. "The girls are supposed to be rather pretty."

"Well, they are," agreed Mr. Prince.

"Really? You know them fairly well, I suppose?"

Mr. Prince swung round in his chair. "Doris, what on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, only I wondered how you found the time to take out these actresses to supper."

He managed to laugh, but he was a little uneasy. "Don't you see, Doris, that's all part of the big scheme. Business."

"Really? Very good business, I should think, for the girl."

"I say, old girl, you don't think I—I've been asking Mabel out to supper because I *wanted* to give her supper?"

"Oh no, I'd never think that. Of course not." Doris had tilted her head at an upward and haughty angle. "Mabel!" she continued. "So that's her name, is it? How nice for you to have friends on the stage!"

"Doris, don't be such a noodle. I tell you I've got hold of a big thing. Mabel's only a pawn in the game. I can't explain at the moment because I'm having a sort of private revenge, but——"

She faced him. "You haven't kissed this—Mabel, I suppose?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have. I had to."

"Oh, you had to, had you?" she burst out furiously; "then you needn't expect to kiss *me* again."

"But don't you understand, it's all part of a——

Oh, Doris, do listen. It may mean a most frightful lot of money——"

"Money! Yes, that's what father has been saying. You think only of money."

He frowned. "I don't. I must have money, I admit, but that's all. And if somebody had insulted you, wouldn't you want to get your own back?"

"Not if it meant being underhanded."

"Who's being underhanded?" he demanded.

There came a long pause, and then a curious thing happened. Only a few minutes before, Mr. Prince had been feeling slightly ueasy; yet now on a sudden everything was all right again. Yet Doris was still angry, or pretending to be angry, and she was certainly very cross. Why, then, had the atmosphere so miraculously cleared? Mr. Prince did not know, but he did know that the "scene" was now over, and he did know that it had ended with himself in a position of advantage.

"We'll have a grand match," he said at last. "I'll give you thirty-five. I've just got time for a hundred. If you win, I promise to tell you everything at once—all about Mabel, and why I've been so often to the ballet, every single thing, Doris; and if I win I'll—well, if I win, the usual, don't you think? Twenty very slowly."

CHAPTER XXIX

The taxicab turned into Fenchurch Street, and Mr. Prince felt for his change. Yes, here he was again at Wennigers, and in a very short while, if affairs went well, all insult would be amply avenged. He passed in, and the same commissionaire asked him his business.

"I've no appointment," said Mr. Prince, parting cleverly with a half-crown, "but I wanted to see Mr. Latrobe just for a few minutes if he's not too busy."

The commissionaire assumed his usual look of doubt, but agreed to do his best. "Though, mind you," said he, "I can promise nothing. Sir William's not been here for the last few days, and Mr. Latrobe——"

"Just give him my card," urged Mr. Prince. "I've scribbled a message on it."

The commissionaire nodded, and disappeared.

Mr. Prince sat down. All was much as it had been a week before. People were hurrying about, and the typewriters were busy. The file of the *Financial Times* was within his reach. No, the place had not changed at all; it was only he himself who was in a rather different position, as Mr. Latrobe might find to his cost in a very few minutes. He did not expect to be refused an interview. By this time it was more than likely that Mr. Latrobe had heard something about his activities. In fact only this morning Mr.

Esmonde had been saying that in certain City quarters there was considerable excitement—about Persian oil. Well, there were occasions when some clever people were too clever by half. . . .

The commissionaire returned. Mr. Latrobe would be free in five minutes.

Mr. Prince was taken upstairs, and sat for a while in the waiting-room. Then a bell rang, and he was shown into Mr. Latrobe's office. "Good morning," said he very cheerily indeed.

The elder man, who looked tired and over-worked, merely nodded, and stared intently at his visitor. As it happened, he had spent a most unhappy week. Things had not been going well. In fact they had taken a turn which was actually alarming, more particularly as the old man himself was keeping to his room with a cold, and had become "difficult." Most important of all, the Grebizoff agreement had not yet been signed. There were persistent rumours of a rival promotion in Persian oil, and these rumours had come to the old man's ears. Sir William had immediately ordered an investigation, and Mr. Latrobe, who had his own methods of dealing with these intricate matters, had been surprised to discover that Lord Bowker's people—Wennigers' greatest rivals—were not touching oil at the moment. It was apparently some new combine about which he could learn very little: enough, however, to upset him. For in some underhand fashion, it seemed, somebody had not only learnt of the proposed agreement with Grebizoff, but was also in process of obtaining some

other concession. And now in the person of that ill-mannered pup who had come whining for a job but a week ago, he was interviewing the moving spirit in this mysterious combine. There was no question about it. Those few words on the visiting-card could not be misunderstood. And Mr. Latrobe was undoubtedly nervous. He did not know what sort of opponent he was pitted against. He began very cautiously.

"I understand from your message," he said, "that you wish to see us about some proposition in—er—Persian oil?"

"Exactly," said the boy. "It is good of you to spare me a few moments, because I know what a busy man you must be. But I shan't keep you more than a few minutes. I expect you remember me. I came here a week ago."

Mr. Latrobe was making an effort to be his usual bland self. "I am busy," he said, "but the firm always has time to listen to legitimate business propositions. On your last visit," he added with a smile, "it was not, I fancy, a question of business so much as——"

"Quite so," interrupted Mr. Prince with a bright smile. "I came here then for a very different reason. But, you see, when I was here, I was lucky enough to see Sir William himself—I generally do have very good luck—and in the course of our conversation Sir William was kind enough to show me a draft agreement. As a matter of fact, it was the draft agreement between your firm and a Prince Grebizoff, and I became inter——"

"The devil!" shouted Latrobe, and bounded out of his chair. "So that's how you learnt! Why, you —you——"

He was obviously very angry, and Mr. Prince looked at him in pained surprise. "Of course it was. How else could I have known anything about it? You see, Mr. Latrobe, Sir William asked my opinion about this agreement. Naturally I knew very little about it, because hitherto I'd been more interested in motor-cars than in oil. I mean, of course, from a business point of view. I'm a director, you know, of Farnham Automobiles Limited. Yes," he added quickly, for Mr. Latrobe seemed likely to interrupt, "it was the Farnham Automobile Hiring Company before reconstruction. I found a good deal of the capital, so of course they made me a director. But oil was something quite new to me. Naturally after I was shown the agreement, I became interested. In fact I made inquiries about this particular oil-field, and I became awfully puzzled. Because, you see——"

"So Sir William asked your advice, did he? Well, I may not be as clever as you, but if you expect me to believe such a preposterous tale——"

"You needn't believe it, you know," Mr. Prince assured him, "and in any case, it doesn't much matter how I learnt, does it? But I want you to understand why I was puzzled. You see, I couldn't make out why you had urged Wennigers to buy a concession that isn't worth twopence."

"What the hell——"

"Not twopence," continued the boy in his airiest

manner. "It did seem so *odd*, you know. I couldn't understand it at all, because the Foreign Office people told me you knew almost as much about the Grebizoff concession as they did themselves. As a matter of fact I dare say they wouldn't have told me as much as they did, but I was able to do them a good turn some weeks ago. A little business they wanted investigated in the Balkans. I was lucky then, too. Yes, the Foreign Office people and I get on very well together. They've given me a government concession, by the way, in Persian oil," he added, and took out his cigarette-case. "Mind if I smoke, Mr. Latrobe?"

There was no doubt about it. Mr. Latrobe was in a terrible rage. He stood there and seemed to be battling with himself. "If you think you can come here," he managed to say, "and threaten——"

"Threaten?" Mr. Prince's eyebrows rose up in astonishment. "Who's threatening? I'm only trying to explain my own position. You see, I didn't know how you people managed these things in the City. I was in the Navy myself, which of course isn't much help when it comes to—well, you know what I mean. And it was really rather funny how I did learn about things. I learnt it all quite casually at the theatre of all places. Yes, the Eastern ballet, you know. I expect you've seen it? Very jolly people, I found, and they seemed to know quite a lot about the City. That's how I found out how you stood yourself, Mr. Latrobe."

"How I stood? What the devil do you mean?"

"Oh, I was thinking of that £10,000 you were going to share with this Russian."

"It's a lie!" cried Latrobe. "You've been spying on my private affairs. You've——"

"Do *listen,*" urged the boy. "I told you I didn't understand these City commissions. But I thought you ought to know that Grebizoff won't be able to pay you your five thousand, because I expect the Foreign Office people will be seeing Sir William about him very soon, and they'll explain about my concession, and then of course Sir William won't want to sign the agreement, will he?"

"You young fiend!" howled Latrobe.

"But these actresses are devilish expensive, aren't they? Particularly the dancers. I know, you see, because I've been meeting some of them myself. Suppers and all the rest of it. The one I liked best is called Mabel. She's a real sport. And don't they chatter away!" He seemed to be chuckling at some memory. "The things they said about you! And Grebizoff! Why, they knew all about the concession. You must have talked——" He stopped, for something very curious was happening to Latrobe. He seemed to be crumpling up. He turned away and walked abruptly to the window. Mr. Prince uneasily wondered whether he intended to throw himself out. He had learnt a great deal about Latrobe's unfortunate infatuation for Tarakovna, and knew of the large sums of money which that admirable performer had been spending. And for a moment he was inclined to be sorry for the man. But the memory of that insult persisted,

and he sat there in silence, and waited for something to happen.

Then suddenly the man at the window turned round. His face was white, and his hands were shaking, but he was trying to be calm. "How much d'you want?" he demanded.

Mr. Prince looked puzzled. "But I've not come here——"

"You know what I mean, you young twister. How much do you want to keep your mouth shut?"

"But—why—Mr. Latrobe, surely you're not trying to bribe me?" Then he braced himself, because it looked as though Latrobe was about to attack him with a chair. His manner changed. "Look here," he said, "I've not come here to blackmail you, as you seem to think. But when a man deliberately works against his employer's interests, it's about time to speak plainly. You chose to treat me like the greenest of kids, and I admit I was angry. And when I was lucky enough to discover the truth about you and Grebizoff, I didn't think much of you. You thought that if Wennigers were known to have taken Grebizoff up, nobody would dare to fight his concession; but, you see, I know very little about the great City houses, and I take people as I find them. I came to London to make money, and I seem to be making it, but I should draw the line——"

"Clear out," shouted Latrobe very hoarsely.

Mr. Prince rose up smiling. "Rather," said he; "I'll go like a shot. But it's curious you using those words, because I was going to use them myself. That's

what I should do, you know, if I were you. Clear out. Clear out altogether." He hummed a little tune as he walked to the door. "Good morning."

Downstairs he tipped the commissionaire for the second time that day: he was feeling rather pleased with himself.

CHAPTER XXX

A COMBINE!

That was what he, young Prince up from Bournsea, the erstwhile Midshipman who had discovered a German spy, had succeeded in forming. An enormously wealthy and important combine, with the most enormously wealthy and important financial magnates, to say nothing of the Government's representatives, upon it. He had been dealing in hundreds of thousands of pounds, and yet he had not lost his head. Perhaps he had been luckier, and even more devilish cunning, than ever before, but he had remained cool, and was now about to reap his reward.

A year had not passed since he had met Mr. Elton and Lady Oxney, and yet already it seemed as though he had achieved his highest ambition. In another week or two all sorts of people in the City would be wanting to know him, and yet only a few days ago they had turned him away from Wennigers!

It was difficult to believe that it could have happened.

Well, it was a fitting conclusion to his labours. In the future, as he had already written to inform Mr. Waynflete, he was going to work harder than ever, but—there would be a greater co-ordination in his various transactions, and no longer would he be the

lonely adventurer who came up to London trusting only to luck.

And so it was with a pleasant sense of security that he drove out one afternoon a few days after his final interview with Latrobe, to Chelsea. He had not been able to see Doris for the last few days, although he had frequently spoken to her on the telephone, but this afternoon there was to be staged a pleasant little scene for her special benefit.

The cab drew up at the Esmondes' house, but its driver was not dismissed. Instead, he was asked to wait. And as it happened, he was obliged to wait for a considerable time, because Mr. Prince seized the opportunity of giving the girl a detailed account of most of his recent doings.

As a result she was prepared to believe that even a stage-dancer of great beauty might be kissed without any regrettable sequel, but could not immediately condone Mr. Prince's methods of business.

"It's most frightfully exciting," she admitted, "but I don't think you've behaved very nicely."

"No," agreed the boy candidly, "I don't think I have, but then the fellow's such a rotter."

"But you did pry into his private affairs, and it looks as if it was just spite on your part—all this business with the dancers and listening to gossip. And, after all, you couldn't expect Wennigers to give you a job just because you asked for it."

"I know, but, you see, Doris, I simply couldn't resist the temptation. When your father told me about the Russian, I knew something must be wrong, and I knew

at once that I should have to find out what it was. I shouldn't have been able to sleep otherwise. Wenniger had practically called me a fool, and I swore to myself I'd prove that I wasn't. Well, it was frightfully difficult, as I've told you, though after I'd met some of the other Foreign Office people—I expect I mentioned I'd been to the ballet, because they told me the rumours about Latrobe and Tarakovna—it was only a question of keeping a good look out. But I've told you all that. And as to my second visit to Wennigers, I thought the fellow who was supposed to know everything ought to be given a lesson."

She was looking doubtfully at him. "But, Oliver, it *was* underhanded of you, using your knowledge of that agreement they showed you."

Mr. Prince smiled. "Was it?" he asked.

"You must see it was."

"That's business."

"Then I don't like your business."

Mr. Prince whistled to himself, and there followed a short pause. Then he looked at his watch. "Hullo, I think we ought to be going."

"Going? Going where?"

"We're going to a party."

She stared.

"Yes. I've got a cab waiting. You'd better get your hat on."

"A party? But you never mentioned anything about a party. Where is it? And I'm not at all sure that I want to go anywhere with you."

"Because I've been underhanded?"

She nodded. "It doesn't matter so much about Latrobe, but Sir William Wenniger didn't do anything wrong."

"If he didn't want anybody to know of the agreement, he oughtn't to have let me see it."

"No, but——"

"I say, Doris, do put your hat on, and don't argue."

"I'm not *arguing,* Oliver, only you seem so casual about these things. It's always money——"

To her surprise he had begun to dance round the room.

"What's the matter now?"

"Nothing, only I feel so keen."

"I can't understand you at all. Where is this party?"

"I promised not to tell till we got there."

"More secrets?"

"Only one more. I say, put your hat on, and I'll tell you in the cab."

"Tell me now, or I won't come."

Mr. Prince hesitated for no more than a moment. Then he flung off his overcoat, and pushed her down on to a sofa, and sat down by her side, and put an arm round her neck. "Doris," he whispered, "I've never been so happy in all my life, and I suppose I shall have to let you into the secret. I haven't told you everything, you know. Not quite everything. Of course I didn't take an unfair advantage of old Wenniger. My original plan was simply to get my own back, but when I found out the truth about the Grebizoff concession and Latrobe's affair with the

dancer, I knew I should have to go back to Sir William himself. I went, as a matter of fact, at ten o'clock in the evening to his private house, and managed to see him by saying I came from the Foreign Office, which was quite true, and then I told him what I'd discovered, and he wouldn't believe it at first, but I gave him all sorts of proofs, and then I reminded him what he'd said about only having use for fellows who had special information for him. And we talked half the night, and he wanted to know all about me, and the house in Bournsea, and about your father and how I'd met him, and all the rest of it. And, don't you see, Doris, it's Wenniger himself who's at the head of the new combine, and it's had to be kept secret because we had to find out all about Latrobe. I expect he's been feathering his nest all along. Of course he'll clear out, if he hasn't gone already. They don't want to prosecute. But old Sir William——" He chuckled. "I say, Doris, don't you *see?* I've been in his employ all the time. Yes, I've had a permanent job for a week! He isn't the sort of man I thought he was. Not a bit. In his own house, and it's the splendidest house you ever saw inside, though the footmen don't wear anything like plush or silk stockings, well, at home he's ripping. And, you know, he likes me no end. In fact he's absolutely taken all my investments over, and he's taking me into Wennigers as his private secretary. And I'm going to live in his house until—well, until I move into Mount Street. And my mother's in London, you know, and Mr. Waynflete, and they're going to be at the party—yes,

he wanted them to come up and meet him—and your father's going to be there, and—oh, it's a sort of celebration. So that he can meet you and—er——"

"And what?" asked Doris, attempting to hide her astonishment.

"Well, I expect he wants to see if he approves of you."

"Oliver—you—beast!"

"Yes, but I won't tease you any more, though you do look ripping when you frown in that way." He moved closer to her. "Doris, little Doris, look at me. We've always been pals, haven't we? But there's something else. I love you. Darling, I love you. And you do love me, don't you? Give me just one little kiss to say you do. Doris, I do love you more than anything else in the world."

The girl's eyes were shining.

THE END

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